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# **VISUAL ART IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH**

**Encouraging creative worship  
and witness in the congregation**



**RICHARD R. CAEMMERER JR.**

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VISUAL ART IN THE LIFE  
OF THE CHURCH

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*For Muz and Dad—  
parents, enablers, creators,  
ministers, friends, and lovers*





# Contents

PREFACE 7

FEAR NOT, FOR BEHOLD 8

CHAPTER ONE  
Encouragement from  
the Church's History 11

*The Early Christians (300-500)*  
*Byzantium (350-1450)*  
*The Migrations (400-900)*  
*The Romanesque Age (1000-1200)*  
*The Gothic Age (1200-1400)*  
*Renaissance and Baroque Periods*  
*(1400-1700)*  
*The Modern Era*

CHAPTER TWO  
Encouragement from  
the Church's Liturgy 25

*Baptism*  
*The Eucharist*  
*The Word*  
*The Church Room*  
*The Church Building*

CHAPTER THREE  
Encouragement from  
the Church's Mission 39  
*The Celebrating Church*

*The Witnessing Church*  
*The Prophetic Church*

CHAPTER FOUR  
Putting the Art to Working 49

*Fiber Art*  
*Wood*  
*Ceramics*  
*Multi-Media*  
*Disposable Art*  
*Everything in Its Place*

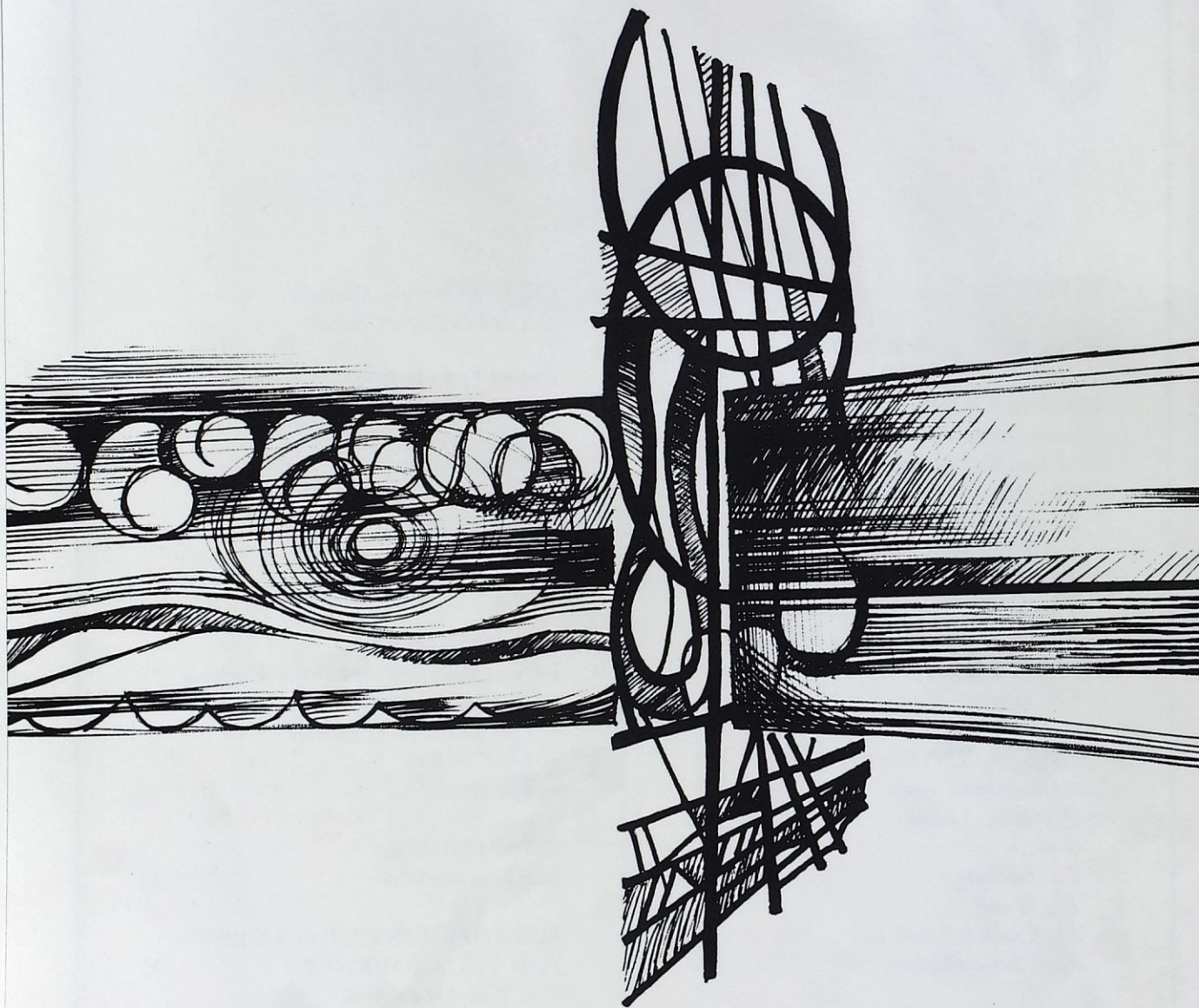
CHAPTER FIVE  
Putting the Congregation to Working 75

*The Building Committee*  
*The Worship Committee*  
*The Children*  
*The Home*

CHAPTER SIX  
Being on the Way 85

FURTHER ENCOURAGEMENT  
FOR YOUR JOURNEY 92

*If You Are an Artist*  
*If You Are on a Building Committee*  
*If You Are on a Worship Committee*  
*If You Are an Onlooker Who Needs*  
*Encouragement*







## Preface

This is a book about art, worship, and witness. It is important that this effort also be art, worship, and witness. The words should not outweigh the imaging, and both together should be more than the sum of the combination.

I am an artist, so I think and write visually. This can be a difficulty, even an offense, to those who don't use and see images among the words. When we aren't accustomed to seeing as we read, or perhaps do not even wish to see, the images can be more of an interruption than an explanation. That is all right. Allow this book to interrupt your customary ways of approaching the work of congregations. Be surprised. Be shocked even. But don't be afraid.

This was not an effort expended in isolation. It required support, space, and time that are only available as gifts from others. Support came from many but none more constant and challenging than that from the family: Liz, David, Kathy, Mike, and Matt. The space came from Grunewald Guild, whose atmosphere of ever-changing people and environment provides an ideal arena in which to create. The time, like all the rest, was a gift to be taken and enjoyed and given back to the Giver as these ideas are shared with you.

Richard R. Caemmerer Jr.  
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## Fear Not, for Behold

A good deal of talk dwells on hard times faced by congregations. Some people find unusual glee in pointing to church buildings now being used as laundromats, discos, and taverns. Pastors complain of being isolated in their offices, becoming little more than office managers and accountants.

Yet there is so much more. I see congregations dealing as special families not only with Sunday morning agendas, but with community, national, and world issues. Many congregations are actively searching for their own special reasons for being. New liturgies are challenging our creative resources. Some of us delight in the challenge; others seem overtaxed. Still others hope that eventually the process of change will go away. Yet each particular congregation, imbedded in its special traditions, supported by its faithful, fearful, active, passive, bubbly, and grouchy members, gathers around Word and sacrament like no other ever did or ever will. Their particular celebration is at one and the same time confirming both their part in a greater company and the uniqueness of their special place and time.

This uniqueness is a visible one. The pastor of a congregation in a San Francisco suburb asked if I would like to see his church, then proceeded to drive me through his parish, knocking on doors

and introducing me to his parishioners. What an unforgettable lesson! A church looks like people doing, as children of God, what they are called to do. And so often what we do is first visual, then verbal. Before you invite me into your home, your home itself lets me know if I really want to come in. And once in, much of who you are, who you love, how you spend your time and money, your taste and what is important to you, is illustrated in your living room. If what you say to me is contradicted by what I see, I will believe my eyes first. And this is not simply the peculiar way an artist works. Most information and ideas are transmitted visually. In an age of data processing and video communications, the importance of the visual is further heightened. In a wonderful recent development, the medical community is exploring the use of mental imaging in the treatment of emotional stress and even chronic pain. This is an age of image, even for those physically unable to see. Now I can hear you wondering why, if I believe all of this, I am not at my easel painting instead of writing.

There are several reasons. The congregation that is not celebrating its mission in the community is not a functioning member of the body of Christ. At a time of great trial, as you and



I witness the destruction of people through careless misuse of resources or manipulation of political power or uncommon ignorance, there is a tendency to wallow in guilt, contributing little more than noisy breast-beating. This, from a "chosen generation," is less than inadequate. I want here to encourage you to show yourselves as you actually are—chosen, redeemed, loved, and able *to* love. Doing so will suggest that we are alive to what goes on around us, that we delight in the world even though we also quarrel with much of it.

I also want to encourage the creativity imbedded in your midst. We have become so fearful of doing something wrong that we end up doing nothing at all. Our fear of monotony is canceled by our fear of change. Because of fear, we become servants of our architects rather than their partners. We send away to stores that sell religious goods for our liturgical needs, not really certain whether we need what we just ordered, but assuming that if it is sold in such a place it will at least not be harmful. Our processes for building and celebrating tend to ignore our special gifts and eliminate the possibilities for affirming the uniqueness of our time, our place, and our people.

Encouragements for this work come from many sources. The church's history

encourages us to celebrate our own special time. How we worship, what we confess, and what our work is in the world provide still more encouragement. I am not providing blueprints or patterns. Instead these are ways to help you ask good questions and take delight in the questioning. There are ideas here for committees charged with the tasks of building or remodeling. There are suggestions and information for guilds and groups responsible for worship and the look of the chancel from Sunday to Sunday. There is an implied blessing for you makers of good things, that a way be found to share your talents within the worshipping community. And, I hope, there is a sense of joy and good humor to flavor all your working and celebrating.

The shepherds had never seen angels before. I doubt if they were visual thinkers at all. Then the angels came, and they sang, and they reassured the shepherds. They commanded those simple folk to go and see—behold—look. The angels' message was amazing and, some might feel, too important to share with the like of shepherds. Those magnificent messengers must have known how the sight of the Lord's glory would frighten their audience. They decided nevertheless to go for something joyous and untraditional. And the story from that moment on is us.









## **Chapter One**

# **Encouragement from the Church's History**

Trust me! History is not boring. Still, it is probably dangerous to try to get folks interested in taking part in a great creative process by starting with a history lesson. History, however, and especially that of the Christian faith as illustrated by art, is fascinating. It is more than that—it is encouraging. To be encouraged, it is important that we share common attitudes about this history. First, history did not end last night, contrary to common opinion. We are in it—a vital part of it. Second, the role of art in history is not just to instruct us about art. An understanding of art will also give us insights into religion, war, economics, government, and the human condition. Art may, in fact, be the most accurate way we have of knowing about certain great chunks of our past. Finally, it truly is possible to come to an understanding about our own situation by studying examples of history. Each era has some special delights to show us as well as special kinds of encouragements to give.



## THE EARLY CHRISTIANS (300-500)

It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine the frustration, excitement, anxiety, and exuberance of the early followers of Christ. Their God was certainly not a typical deity. He suffered. He died. He rose from the dead. His immediate followers were accused of being atheists. This was a time of caution and fear. But it also was a time of choice and commitment. Home and house churches were the first places of celebration. The catacombs held larger celebrations on sites with special impact for the early faithful. Place was of extreme importance, particularly a place that witnessed a great event. Thus the places that witnessed the milestones in Christ's life—birthplace, tomb, sites of his ministry—were identified as accurately as possible and eventually marked by a building for worship or commemoration. Other important witness sites were identified with the lives of the saints, their activities, their martyrdom. In its earliest meaning, *martyr* meant witness. Places as well as people participated in the work of witnessing, and both were marked with special art.

In all the miles of catacombs with their thousands of paintings and markings, no expressions of despair are evident. Living

from day to day, some under sentence of death, these Christians were nevertheless compelled to give visible evidence of the hope that was in them. They sent messages encouraging one another to withstand the ordeals they had to face. On the walls they painted illustrations of Old Testament figures who were led by God through trial: Jonah, Daniel, the three men in the fiery furnace. They depicted heroes of the faith: apostles, martyrs, friends. A great variety of skill was demonstrated by these artists, from highly sensitive to very crude. But none complained; instead they and their images exuded hope and joy.

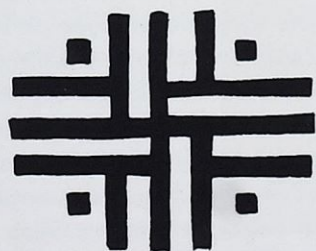
Art from this time provides other lessons for us. When the sculptor of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus portrayed Christ on the throne of judgment, his visual language was not only Christian but Roman. The throne, therefore, needed the support of Zeus and his blanket. Christ himself was depicted as a beardless youth in a toga, an Apollo figure. This one work suggests a number of useful attitudes. First, the visual vocabulary we are accustomed to using because of cultural, ethnic, or aesthetic background is useful and necessary in the expression of our faith. There is no such thing as a specific style of Christian art. Those who feel a work of art or a building must be





executed in a certain style in order to best exemplify the Christian faith come closer to honoring the style than the faith. This is a form of idolatry.

Perhaps the saddest commission with which I was ever involved was for the archbishop of Uganda, Ruanda, and Burundi. He asked that I design a chapel for the occasion of the archbishop of Canterbury's visit to Uganda. I gathered Ugandan craftsmen to weave raffia floor mats, carve a crucifix, inlay a banana fiber mosaic on the altar mensa, and stitch a barkcloth reredos. When it was completed, I called the African archbishop in to see it. He was horrified and accused me of designing some sort of ethnic museum rather than a proper place of prayer. He ordered the chapel dismantled and refurnished with an Acrilan carpet, a damask-rose-patterned reredos, a small marble altar, and a brass cross, all sent by rush order from an ecclesiastical art dealer in England. How sad when we are convicted by the church itself of unworthy skills and expressions of faith. When pastors believe that their parishioners are not capable of adequate praise, the sadness is compounded. The Ugandan archbishop's attitude is multiplied in countless parishes the world over.



The second lesson we learn from the Junius Bassus sarcophagus has to do with the relationship of the sacred and secular. Where, on the sarcophagus, do we make the division? Is Christ on the throne sacred and Zeus and his blanket secular, if not pagan? I am reminded of Gauguin's wonderful painting of Jacob wrestling with an angel. The action takes place before a group of Breton village women. Would we cut the painting in half in an attempt to create a distinction between the physical and spiritual, between the sacred and secular, between the historically accurate and the purely inventive? We must become more aware of the possibilities of the physical conveying the spiritual, the finite conveying the infinite. We do not make a shaft of wheat sacred by embroidering it on a parament. If the blanket of Zeus was able to convey the majesty of Jesus, then our time also has its motifs for doing the same. Perhaps the discoveries made using microscopes and telescopes can provide the images through which we gain a hint of the power of the King of creation. Our catalog of images cannot be restricted to the so-called religious. A dynamic depiction of the extent of the cosmos can tell us more about the lordship of Jesus than a hundred halos.





### BYZANTIUM (350-1450)

Constantinople, now Istanbul, was a unique place: a city half in Europe and half in Asia. Its great emperor, Justinian, built the Hagia Sophia, the Church of the Holy Wisdom, as Constantinople's major monument. The basic building style of the West was the basilica: a long rectangular style that remains by far the most popular church architectural format. The style of commemorative building in the East, however, was the circular, central plan. The Japanese pagoda, the Taj Mahal, and the mosque are examples of central-plan buildings. The wonderful solution of the Hagia Sophia, built in a place where the East meets the West, was a combination of central and longitudinal plans: an ingenious central dome supported by half-domes that created a rectangular floor plan.

The significance of this building for us lies not in its immensity nor in the beauty and richness of its mosaics. There is nothing in this building that we could copy even with an unlimited budget. The design and decoration of the Hagia Sophia is so unique to its time and place that it would make little sense to duplicate it elsewhere. That, in fact, is its significance. Our wheat fields are full of miniature Gothic cathedrals; our cities are replete with Romanesque-ish replicas. Very few of our church buildings celebrate, as does the Hagia Sophia, the uniqueness of their place, their time, and their special people. The mediocrity of much of our building is the result of a desire to celebrate someone else's solutions. That, of course, isn't as much



celebration as it is forgery. We misunderstand the meaning of tradition as it relates to church art if we assume it to be anything other than one of constant change. If our buildings and art do not acknowledge the 20th century in their look and function, they will not conform to the best traditions of Christian art and architecture.

Along with its major architectural monuments, the icon is perhaps the most unique contribution of Byzantium to the development of Christian art. The idea of the icon is difficult to describe, particularly to those who have a deep-seated fear of images in the service of worship. Such a fear, I suspect, is shared by most Protestants. The admonition against representational imagery within the Hebrew and Moslem traditions might suggest that the fear is not altogether misplaced.

In its efforts to bridge the gap between the finite and infinite, the Byzantine liturgy employed the use of imagery extensively. Jesus, Mary, the apostles, and saints were depicted on panels or walls in a style half realistic and half abstract. These images had a particular function to perform in corporate or personal worship. In the context of that worship, they were no longer images but *were* the person to whom they referred. The Image Made Without Hands, the Christ of Veronica's Veil, was, in liturgy, not a picture of Christ, but Christ himself.

Icons were painted by priests during the process of fasting. There were very specific rules and regulations to follow in the painting of the images. The use of icons in liturgy was also prescribed. In

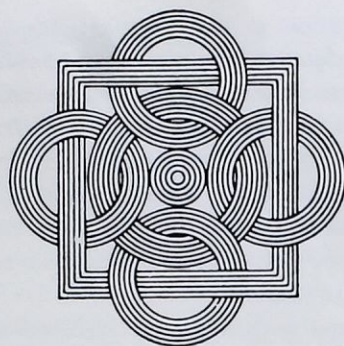
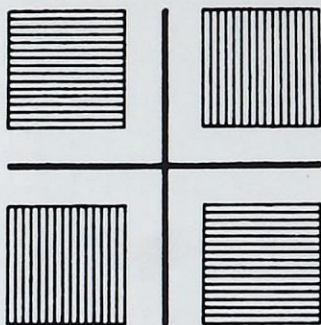
liturgy the images were the persons depicted, just as the bread is the body of Christ. The corporate body of Christians acknowledged this to be so. Thus the images affirmed the communion of saints rather than themselves or their makers.

We are not accustomed to extending our sacramental visual experience this far, but it definitely goes this far. Most of us ignore the processes by which the bread and wine get to the altar. It isn't magic. Someone, probably in the Napa Valley, grew and harvested grapes. Someone mashed them, aged the juice, and put that juice into bottles. Someone went to the store with money and purchased a bottle from the shelf. Someone poured it from its bottle into the chalice. The process of getting from the vineyard to the mouth is not only full of very human activity, it is the same process used in getting food to our dining-room tables. Where does the sacramental part come in? I am probably like many of you; I don't attempt to figure out how the elements on the altar convey body and blood as the wine trickles down my throat or as I swallow the bread. I accept the promise that is also being accepted by my fellow saints as we gather around the table. God's promise and presence make these elements important; they make this matter matter. Therefore, the sacramental part begins not at the table, not with the choir and candles, but in the vineyards and wheatfields. It also starts in your homes and where you work. The elements present are gathered from many outposts: the wine from California or New York, the bread from Pennsylvania or Kansas or your kitchen, the eyes and mouths and



hearts from homes on scattered streets.  
It is in the coming together, the gathering,  
that the sacramental is contained.  
It is not where two or three wafers are  
gathered, or chalices, or altars, or  
pictures, or organs, or windows, that  
Christ is in the midst. It is with us,  
gathered in his name.

For a picture painter who is also a  
Christ confessor, the world of icons is  
awesome and wonderful. Imagine a  
specifically defined ministry where  
theology, liturgy, and art could meet  
together to celebrate the sacramental life.  
What possibilities for potent celebration  
and witness! On second thought, there is  
nothing in our confessions or what we  
have been called to be in this world  
that should prevent it.



### THE MIGRATIONS (400-900)

Everyone was on the move to  
somewhere, or so it seemed. Islam was  
moving across north Africa, heading for  
Spain and eventually central France.  
Goths, Ostragoths, Visagoths, Vandals,  
Huns, Normans, Lombards: these are  
some of the names we read about from  
this time, and they are the names of  
people in a state of flux. Generally their  
wandering was in a westerly direction,  
so much of the sense of style and design  
they brought with them was of an  
oriental type.

As we look at the art of the time of the  
great migrations and at the efforts of  
artists whose names are unknown to us,  
we tend to pass it off as minor. Our label,  
"Dark Ages," is a way of passing over  
this time so that we can get on with more  
important matters. It is true that few  
great buildings were built during this  
time. These folks probably didn't want to  
take on a 35-year mortgage knowing  
they would be moving shortly. But the  
monuments they produced, capable of  
being carried in saddlebags, have  
influenced and delighted each succeeding



generation. More than that, these monuments were the stuff around which much of their life centered. The monuments were, of course, their books. A book could be an entire dowry if the bride was a princess. Books purchased kingdoms. A saint was sent from Rome to England to be a teacher—in exchange for a book. Illuminators spent lifetimes on a single manuscript. Highly trained and gifted monks spent years decorating while others wrote. Miraculously complex illuminations fill their pages. Styles combined many influences: oriental, classical, Hiberno-Saxon, Carolingian, Merovingian. Jewelled covers, intricate interlace, careful scripting, and painstaking craftsmanship all went into the bookmaking, an effort whose sole intent was evangelism, the conversion of the wandering hordes. The artwork itself was small and portable, but the art process was monumental. It was full of delight, precious, careful, reverent, and appropriate.

We are wanderers too; we are all people "on the way." We have no continuing city here. We are "strangers and pilgrims." That language is not a call to get sloppy, but rather a call to rejoice. Creation is a gift. Our creative resources are gifts. Each moment we have has its own reasons for giving thanks. Each day, new that morning, calls forth our reasons to celebrate, to watch, and to care. The attributes we have used to characterize the art of the time of the great migrations—full of delight, precious, careful, reverent, appropriate—need not be foreign to our art as we also find ourselves on the way.



### THE ROMANESQUE AGE (1000-1200)

The monastic system that began in the age of migrations became powerful during the Romanesque Age and gave it much-needed stability. Divisions of territories into small provinces prevented intercommunication and caused squabbling among rulers. Monasteries were centers of learning that also provided a place of safety.

Together with the growing strength of the monasteries, a number of other events seemed to unify the time. The Crusades focused the church's attention on a common cause but added a feeling of instability. Also, many people believed that the world would end during the year 1000. Perhaps too much has been attributed to this belief, but it is true that few monuments were built immediately before the millennium and that much building was begun immediately after, starting around 1004. A monk, Raoul Glaber, wrote in his diary that "... it was as though the very world had shaken herself and cast off her old age, and were clothing herself everywhere in a white garment of churches."



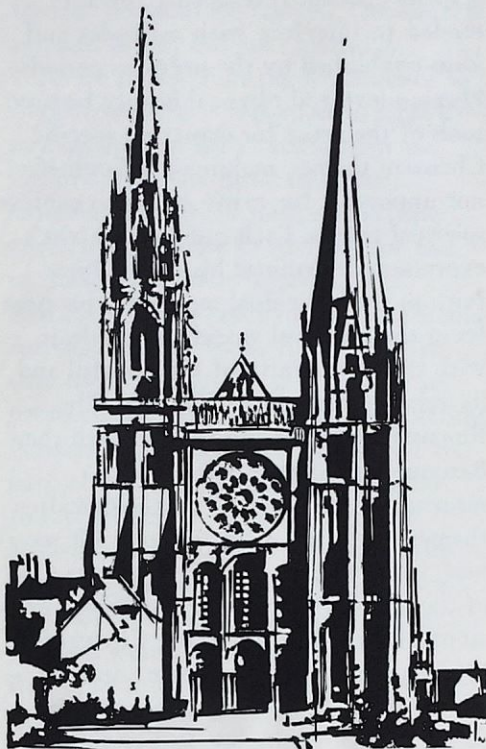
Romanesque churches, most of which were attached to the monasteries, illustrated many of the conditions and concerns prevalent at the time. Over the entrance was Christ Pantocrator on the throne of judgment. Much sculpture was devoted to the judgment theme: the punishment for evil-doing, the reward for righteousness. Many of the churches were even dedicated to St. Michael, the angel of judgment. There is another side to this work, however. Along with demons, monsters, and the torments of hell, the delights of those who fear, love, and trust in God also were depicted. Giselbertus, the sculptor of Autun, exemplifies the artists working with this paradox of faith, the juxtaposition of fear and delight. His sculpture of Eve depicts with uncanny simplicity a woman caught between her participation in Satan's temptation and her own despondency over what she knows is about to transpire. She is at the same time cunning and penitent. Among pieces carved at the same church were

capitals depicting the holy family traveling to Egypt smiling and singing (the donkey has wheels!) and the three Wise Men in bed together being signaled by an angel gently touching the finger of one man's conveniently outstretched arm.

Church architecture at this time expanded the collaboration of faith and foolishness. Built on a new monumental scale, with new construction techniques (which didn't always succeed), the buildings often exhibited a giddiness that belied the seriousness of the projects. Styles changed midstream, as did materials and designs. Small chapels had no access—one step in a staircase was 12 feet high. What appears as foolishness is, in fact, a response to the context of the time. Aware of pending judgment, but free because each day was obviously grace-full, these people visualized their joys and fears in spontaneous outpourings. And it was on the foundation of these expressions of faith that the Gothic Age was built.







### THE GOTHIC AGE (1200-1400)

The Gothic Age has been called the age of faith. I suspect that, when comparing the two, the Romanesque Age demonstrated faith far more dramatically, making the Gothic Age more an age of piety.

When Abbot Sugar determined to rebuild the east end of the abbey church of St. Denis in Paris, he initiated the first Gothic building project. The Gothic style brought to a successful conclusion the quest for height, width, and accessibility of light in one structure. This quest had

been the business of church builders from the time of the early basilicas. The broken arch simplified the interior space while eliminating the need for extensive buttressing. Thus great walls of glass could be incorporated into the structure allowing light—the dominating sign of God's presence—to enter. The gospel motif prevailed. Where Christ the Judge dominated the facade of the Romanesque cathedral, on the Gothic cathedral the good God stepped down from above the entrance and stood at the side of the door blessing the worshipers as they entered. While the churches were built by the monasteries in Romanesque times, in the Gothic Age cities became the dominant powers and cathedral building became a civic enterprise, with one city often competing with another.

We are more familiar with the Gothic style than with any other since we have often idolized it in our own building programs. However, in building imitation Gothic churches we have failed to be truly Gothic. A close look at a true Gothic building will show a microcosm, an illustration of the Gothic world view. Beasts protected the upper stories, monks and nuns cavorted as illustrations of evil behavior, grapes were turned to wine in the vintner's window, beavers were trapped and pelts made into hats in the hatmaker's window. Gothic art affirmed Gothic life. To be true to the Gothic tradition we must celebrate, not Sugar's or Aquinas' or Abelard's world view, but our own.

A further extension of the Gothic lesson for our time would be to confront the infinite by totally apprehending the



finite. We need to learn from the *larva Dei*, the masks of God. These masks are elements that both contain and reveal the divine, and they are found not only in religious enterprise, but in creation, in newspaper headlines, in neighbors and strangers. Confrontations with these elements allow us to penetrate through what we see and what we experience to a greater reality. That reality is for us, as it was for the Gothic artisans and architects, the Lord of time and history.

### THE RENAISSANCE AND BAROQUE PERIODS (1400-1700)

It is interesting and humbling to discover how birth is a kind of death. I have a wonderful piece of African sculpture that depicts a woman going through labor. In a series of small forms circling the new mother, the child emerges from the womb. As it emerges, it changes in color from black to white. For the African, black is the color of life and white is the color of death. The womb was black, full of life, and the process of emerging from the life source is the process of dying.

*Renaissance* means rebirth. In the process of giving new birth to the classical tradition, something of value died. The classical tradition of ancient Greece and Rome was one that affirmed humanity as the measure of everything, with reality defined primarily by what the eye saw. The spiritual emphasis of the early Christian, Byzantine, Romanesque, and Gothic ages abstracted visual reality to reinforce the infinite, the reality of the spirit. With the development and

imposition of the classical, the two realities clashed. Intellectual curiosity tended to interfere with attitudes and ideas established by the previous periods. Human love and physical beauty became tools of the artist for depicting specific Christian themes, making it difficult if not impossible for many artists to express spiritual truths. Each individual artist's expression determined his genius. New faith in the individual separated this time from the medieval world, which dealt with the community of the faithful and its relationship to the Trinity. The Renaissance artists and the artists of the Baroque period that followed also resurrected the "pagan" mythological themes of the pre-Christian era. We see here, in the history of art, a demonstration of the continuing circular movement of all of history. The terrifying Christ of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* and the Christ of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus form a visual beginning and ending to a circular development, suggesting that it is now time to start over, to find a new thread.

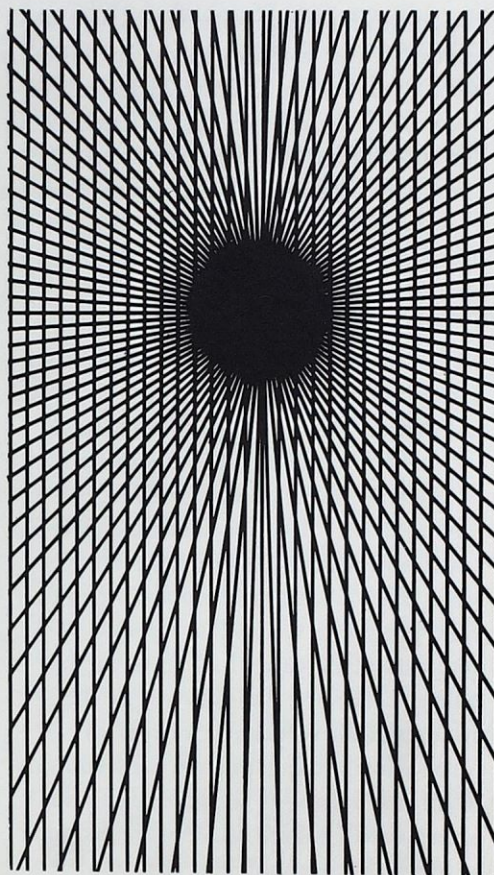
From this too-brief description of the Renaissance, you might receive the impression that art was not doing its job of blending the physical with the spiritual, that it may have succumbed to pure flesh and flash, that perhaps we should not even include it in a discussion of church-related enterprise. I suspect that, excepting Michelangelo and El Greco, this might be true. It might also be true of the church itself. While no one argues with the greatness of the Renaissance and Baroque artists and the fact that they probably reached the pinnacle of artistic



achievement, we cannot find here the apex of religious expression. The church as client simply did not demand it.

As we move from the Renaissance to the Baroque era, it is possible to sense a serious shift in art's relationship to Christianity. Up until this time, Christianity was the source of artistic zeal. It was a cause to struggle for and to grasp. The time following the Renaissance, and much of the Renaissance for that matter, seems filled with art that uses Christianity as an excuse to promote the artist's talent or imagination. Perhaps the Renaissance artists were too hard an act to follow. Many who did follow seemed so bent on outdoing Michelangelo and Raphael technically that they omitted the spirit. Grünewald with his emotional intensity, Tintoretto with his wonderful light, and Rembrandt with his coupling of mystery to humanity are wonderful and treasured exceptions.

Too much of the religious art of this time is theatrical and excessive, with no other focus than its own show. Art has lost its sense of servanthood and now insists on being served. From this time until our own, that role for art has remained constant. The ideas and events that encouraged artistic intensity are no longer spiritual but intellectual and technological. The absence of the spiritual is a disaster to creative expression, not to mention the effects it has on the output of Christian art. When this absence is national or even worldwide, as it has been for much of the past three centuries, the recovery cannot be immediate. We are, in fact, still waiting and working for it.



## THE MODERN ERA

It depends on the person to whom you are speaking, and perhaps on the country in which you are doing your research, whether you are convinced that anything of worth in church art and architecture has been done in the last 200 years. The British love Coventry Cathedral too much and the work of Stanley Spencer not enough. The Germans are contributing to the art and architectural solutions of the liturgical renewal. The French can claim Corbusier and Ronchamp with pride. Italians are world leaders in interior



design but have done little to move their expertise into worship space. In America we are still trying to finish cathedrals in New York and Washington, D.C., while the most creative work goes relatively unnoticed in the smaller cities and towns. Developments in Africa, Asia, or Central and South America are seldom seen as significant contributions.

From the time of the French Revolution the history of art exploded into countless fragments and directions. This may have been caused by the decline, if not total elimination, of the traditional patronage sources. The churches had not commissioned much innovative art or architecture since the Baroque era, and the work of that period developed a terrible reputation. Royalty had gone to the block. Cities were caught up in the Industrial Revolution. Sources of inspiration and ingenuity were seemingly dried up. Solutions to the design and ornament of sacred space were reduced to the repetition of the trite and saccharine excesses of the past. These solutions spoke to the wealthy and had virtually nothing to say to the poor and powerless. The immediate heritage of contemporary church design was not only unimaginative, but irrelevant to the concerns of the time and unresponsive to common folk.

A significant change in the design of church buildings was taking place in Europe shortly before the outbreak of World War II. This change involved a move toward simplicity and liturgical appropriateness. In a reaction to the excesses of previous styles, architects

often resorted to sterile design, but the change of focus was much needed and long overdue. Of utmost importance to the change of attitude that brought about a truly contemporary development in church art and architecture was *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII's encyclical of 1963. It, together with other of his writings and the deliberations of Vatican II, focused the attention of the church and its liturgy on contemporary society, with all of its problems of industrialization, disintegration, and alienation.

It is not possible or necessary to compare the church art of our time with art of the past. The schism between what the church confesses and the expressions of creativity and imagination that are the occupation of the artist has never been greater. Artists have been accusing churches of nonsupport while churches accuse artists of lack of interest. There seems enough guilt for everyone, but the guilt is not producing either excellent spaces for worship or artistic expression of faith. It is enough, sadly, to realize that an immense majority of buildings and spaces devoted to praise, meditation, discussion, and celebration of our life in Christ continue to reflect a life uninspired, unlovely, uncaring, and uninteresting. Is it that the message of the church is as insignificant and boring as we have made it appear? Absolutely not! It is as vital now as it was on that mount when Christ preached it. Is it that art no longer is able to speak with passion and beauty about those things pertaining to Christian life? Absolutely not! I believe that we have simply depended too long



on solutions that are not our own to express the hope that is in us.

Some art of the modern era reflects the Christian faith dynamically and with great conviction. Vincent van Gogh not only never received a church commission but might be thought by most to be ineligible for consideration as an artist of Christian merit. This reflects one of the unfortunate reasons for our lack of artistic vitality—our belief that for art to be Christian it must utilize traditional Christian themes and be executed in traditional Christian styles. If this book has any use at all, it will be as it attempts to dissuade you from that attitude. The Christian artist who would serve his or her faith concentrates on being Christian and then makes art that expresses that life, no matter what the theme. Churches should foster and be arenas for those expressions. Thus van Gogh's shoes and sunflowers could convey to the community of Christ the messages of concern, compassion, and celebration.

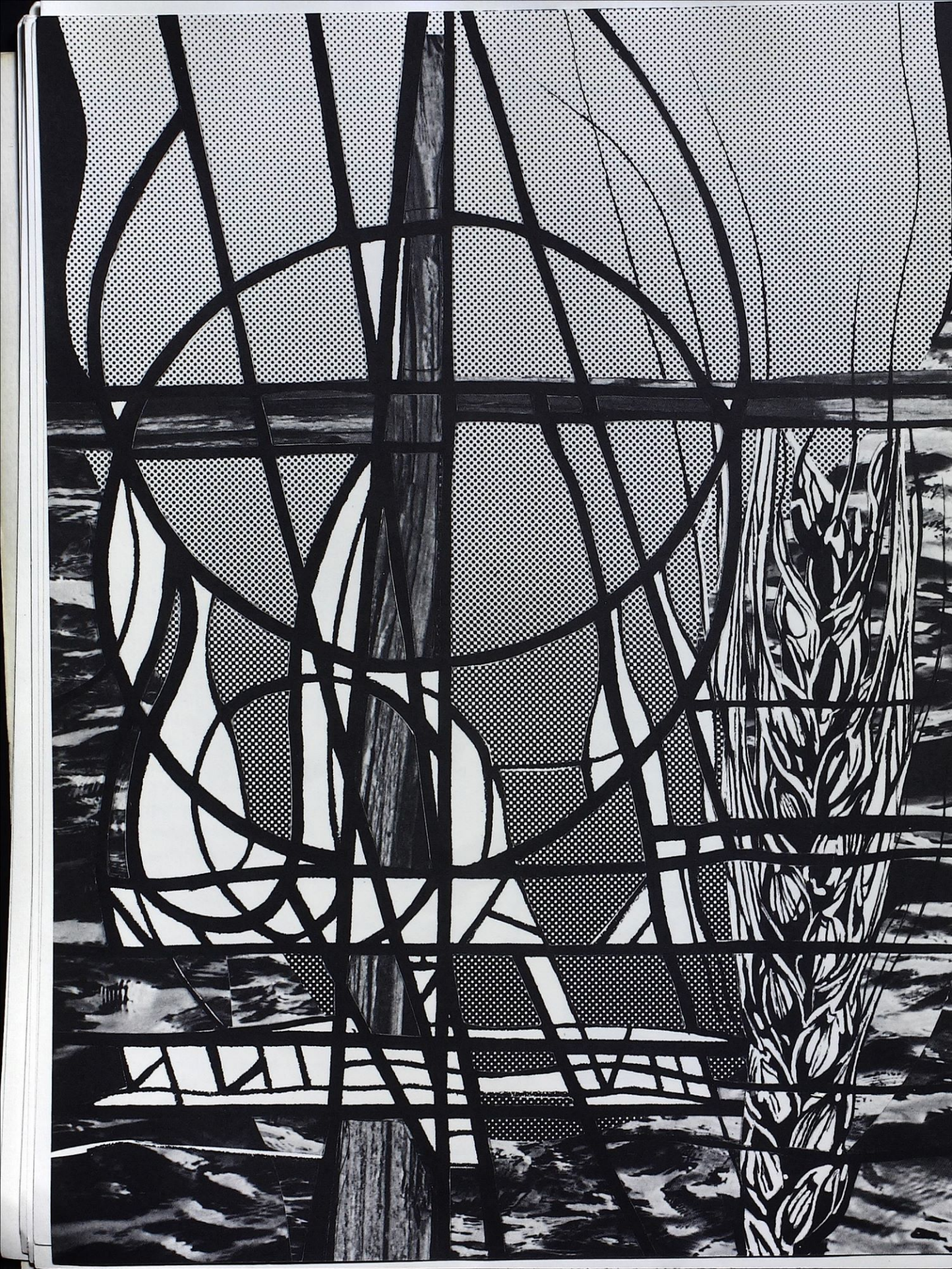
Twentieth century artists such as Rouault, Kollowitz, Beckmann, Leger, Manessier, Barlach, Giacometti, Moore, and Lippold are not as familiar to us as

Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, or Rembrandt, but each has created the visual messages needed by the Christian communities of our time. Kathe Kollowitz is equally if not better qualified to speak to us of our unique concerns than Rembrandt. Neither, to my knowledge, received a commission from a congregation.

I am not suggesting that congregations become art appreciation study groups. First things first. I am suggesting the exercising of hearts and eyes to new possibilities. The message of the gospel comes in more ways than we have ever imagined, or ever will. The expression of a private faith can be celebrated publicly. Even work by those who confess no creed can and ought to be acknowledged and used within the confessing community. The explosion of styles and techniques and the growing numbers of artists with special visions are the wells from which the churches can draw refreshment and challenge and the reminders that our mission is to this world's needy, this world's quest for peace, and this world's hunger for the message of the gospel.











## Chapter Two

### Encouragement from the Church's Liturgy

Having recently participated in an intensive study trip to the Soviet Union, I was again struck by the drama, mystery, and color of Orthodox liturgy. Foreign to most of our worship experience is the role of the icons, the constant signing of the cross, the bowing and prostrating, the elaborate vestments. Our senses are bombarded so continuously in Orthodox liturgy that without instruction we can make almost no connections between it and our own almost totally verbal worship experience. Our untrained eyes let us down. On the other hand, it might well be that we are just as unfamiliar with what our own worship means. Repetition may have lulled us into uninformed contentment. I wish that I could look at you while we discuss these things. The elements of our worship are so dear that to suggest new ways of understanding them could be a hurting thing. This is by no means my intention. Rather, I want you to find new joys and reasons for celebrating your life in God's grace. This life is new each morning and connected wonderfully to all who celebrate its grace-fullness in their own special ways.



## BAPTISM

On more occasions than I care to recall, I have accused congregations of visually belittling the power, drama, and meaning of the Baptism event. The visual treatment of Baptism varies, of course, from denomination to denomination, from congregation to congregation. But if past experience is reliable, I suspect that in most Lutheran church rooms the font is buried under the flag in the northeast corner. It has a lid on it that requires a combination weight lifter and locksmith to remove. And once the lid is off, we discover a small, dusty, spun-aluminum ashtray with a dead fly in it. Is this the way we want our entry into the life of the body of Christ visually conveyed? Not likely!

Baptism is nothing less than death and resurrection—Christ's and ours. It is the beginning of eternal life, so it is also a birthing moment. It is a pivotal time, a time of covenant, of promise, of drama. It is a time of drowning and dying, and that alone suggests that Baptism is a daily office and the remembrance of our Baptism a continual event. It also suggests what might be appropriate as we visualize Baptism. First, the means of grace is water, not fonts. Some of you must have experienced, as I have, the emergency Baptism of a loved one in a hospital. Water in a paper cup sufficed, because the promise was in the water and the Word, not in the font. As we visually relate the significance of this sacrament, for goodness' sake, *show the water!* The font should be servant to the water. Any visualizing or symbol making should point to the business that happens in the water.







I have in recent years come to believe that the more water the better. Some Christian communities practice immersion. Others take infants by the heels and immerse them three times. In sharp contrast, many other communities feel that neatness counts—a bit of moisture followed quickly by a swipe with a clean napkin. I certainly opt for more water than I have been accustomed to. I want to hear water. I want to see water. I would like to see the need for someone to mop up after a baptism, just as someone needs to mop up after a birth. It should be untidy drama. Parents and sponsors heave a sigh of relief when the baby sleeps through the event. I worry, fearing the baby might have just missed the most important time of its life.

The significance of the drowning and dying and rising again event can suggest where the water might be placed. The early church placed the font outside the worship room. The place of worship was set apart for those “in the body.” Since Baptism was the entrance into that body, it was deemed appropriate to conduct the entrance ritual outside of that body’s worship place. Baptism occurred once a year, at the Easter Vigil, thus emphasizing the relationship with the death and resurrection of Christ. Because hundreds had to be accommodated in the baptistry at this annual event, baptistries were often as monumental as the cathedrals they adjoined, and often as artistically ornate.

The baptistries, and the fonts inside of them, were more often than not eight-sided, an interesting story in itself. That shape related the font to the Rotunda of



the Anastasis, the building built over the site of Christ's entombment and resurrection. Furthermore, the number eight held special significance. Seven was the number of completeness—seven vices, seven virtues, seven days in the week, seven notes in the musical scale. The number eight was thus the number of beginning again and a significant sign to use in conjunction with the "rebirth" aspect of Baptism.

Such signs continue to be useful as they instruct us in the meanings imbedded in ritual and as they connect us to the church's history. But new insights and changing history call for new signs. The Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops calls for congregational participation in the act of Baptism and even recommends immersion. Why not conduct Baptism in the midst of the congregation? The importance of Baptism to our whole life should encourage us to see the relationship of the water to other rites: weddings, confirmations, funerals.

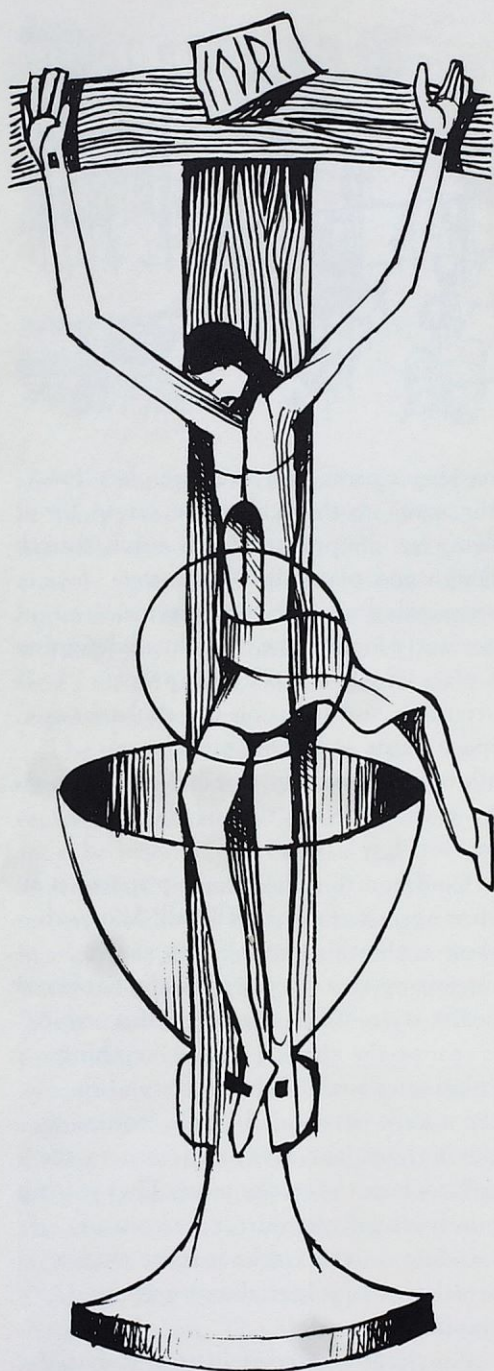
The design and execution of the font must befit its task. Although it might be movable, it should not appear portable. It should have visual substance that focuses on the water. There is an interest by many in using *living water* (moving water) in the font. Gurgling fountains in the middle of congregations, elaborate plumbing and noisy pumps that cloud the meaning of *living*, and the inability to baptize without moving the water makes this approach seem rather unnecessary to me. Like all major appointments, the font must be incorporated into the concept

of the entire worship space and not designed or placed as an afterthought. Recent fonts executed out of wood and ceramic have provided a warmth not found in metal and stone. Yet, with sensitive design, any materials can be used.

Design is crucial. Fonts have come to us in many forms: miniature cathedrals, end tables, swooping metal birds, immense sewer pipes, even a drawer in the altar. I am aware of a font that requires a hard tug on a bronze bird to raise an enormous lid. When considering the design of a baptismal font, there are a number of things to remember: the design should not command more attention than the action to which it refers, the font should be of one design sense with the worship space, it should be a container for visible water, and it should be in a place that allows for community observation and participation.

Creative congregations have devised numerous ways to take the Baptism rite out of the routine and into the celebrative. Many now use a small chasuble as a baptismal garment, signifying the baptized as a new priest in the priesthood of all believers. Some pastors carry newly baptized infants through the congregation to introduce them to their new "families." Many fonts have candleholders incorporated. The candle burning at the font is used to light the baptism candle given to the baptized. A Maryland congregation placed its font with moving water in the narthex. At the service of Baptism, a sponsor fills a pitcher from the font and brings the water to the altar, filling a bowl held there by one of the other participants in the service. In this





instance, the font's location is traditional but the action around it speaks in new ways about the drama of the sacrament.

### THE EUCHARIST

We call her Aunt Esther and she smiles a great deal. But her smile takes on special meaning as it flashes at you across the table at the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The first time I saw people coming from the altar smiling I suspected that they weren't taking the event seriously enough. But I know Aunt Esther. She takes the Lord's Supper very seriously, and she smiles anyway. In fact, it's the reason for the smile.

Whatever our reasons, most of us come away from this sacramental experience looking very dejected. There is probably an element of piety that calls for a sober expression at such times. For some, the mystery of the moment produces an attitude of awe. For others, the same event causes wonderment or even the appearance of a questioning look on their faces. These expressions are in themselves a visual form of communication, informing others of our attitudes and feelings. When it comes time to decide how church rooms will be built, altars designed, and whether communion rails will be installed or not, these attitudes will be verbalized. Personal piety and even awe are shaped into forms that are defended against the onslaughts of the opinions of others. It is especially at the time of building and renovating that I miss Aunt Esther's smile.

In some of the large basilicas of the Constantinian age, 10,000 people could stand for the services. The entire design





and decoration of these early church buildings, in fact their primary reason for being, was to focus on the celebration of the Eucharist. Yet the altar often was a cube—a meter high, a meter wide, and a meter deep. Except that they were most often draped with beautiful fabrics, I imagine they looked more like card tables than the altars to which we are accustomed. They were large enough to hold the books and vessels and no larger. Eventually acquisition of relics caught up to altar design. Looking for the proper place to locate the body of a saint, many congregations determined that the altar would be most appropriate. Since a cube would force the body into an unsaintly fetal position, the altar was changed to a sarcophagal or crypt form. This form remains quite constant to this time, although the function has long disappeared.

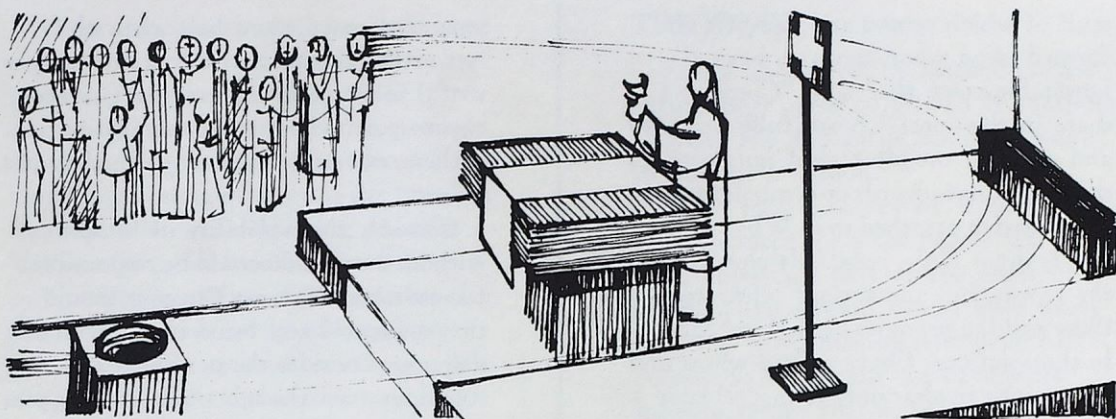
The altar, or altar-table, or table, depending upon your congregational or denominational persuasion, is the visual focus of most liturgical spaces, just as it was for the early Christian basilica. Just as the function of the altar has changed,

no longer providing a resting place for the saints, so the eucharistic reason for being has disappeared from much church design and planning. While the redesigning of altar forms seems perfectly logical, the thought of designing a place of worship without proper attention and focus on the eucharistic space seems as much a mistake as allowing the weekly worship service to go by without celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Common to many worship spaces is an altar against the chancel wall. Many of these are nothing more than shelves, suggesting that the meal might be served buffet style. When the focus of worship is against the chancel wall, everything culminates there. When we stand in the middle of railroad tracks looking at the horizon, our eyes are drawn to the point where the tracks meet. That point is purely visual, yet our experience of standing on the tracks is more than a visual one. It is spatial and perhaps emotional as well.

An essential part of liturgy is spatial. We talk about "gathering around Word





and sacrament.” Furthermore, we affirm in liturgy the actions of all the people, not only those present but “the holy church throughout all the world.” It is important, therefore, that we focus our worship, not at a point on a wall, but on God’s action among the people and their response to that action.

The centrality of the altar is not dependent solely on its location, but also on its size and design. It must, like the font, be wonderfully crafted and appropriate in material and design to its setting. It should be freestanding in a liturgical space, allowing the celebrant to stand behind it facing the congregation. While most of us are accustomed to long, tomb-shaped altars, a much more appropriate shape would be square or slightly rectangular, more like your dining room table than a coffin. A well-designed, uncluttered space for the altar also is necessary for visualizing the sacredness of events that happen there.

Altars, like fonts, come in assorted shapes and sizes. The altar of my former home church was spectacular, 20 feet in length, covered in a marble mosaic

depicting the apocryphal signs of the gospel writers. Such an altar! I received an early lesson in liturgical design from Peter Hammond, the eminent British liturgical consultant, at the occasion of his first inspection of this wonderful altar. “Where,” he commented dryly, “is your 18-foot tall priest?”

Stone is the traditional material for altars. While I have seen many handsome contemporary altars executed in stone (I think particularly of the sensitive designs for granite altars designed by Frank Kacmarcik), I have become much more sympathetic to designs that approximate the feel and look of a table. Of course, a table can be many things, and I would not suggest the collapsible chrome design found in breakfast nooks across the country. I am thinking of weight and visual mass, and some form that will connect the liturgy with the family meal. I am thinking of legs rather than a pedestal. I am thinking of transparency, some feeling of seeing through those legs to the pastor or priest who is the host at this meal. At this moment, I am thinking of wood. It is the



stuff of which crosses and manglers are formed. And wood seems to have a hospitable voice that says, "Come and share in this meal." Beautifully designed and crafted, the altar need not, perhaps should not have words or symbols carved or painted or attached to it. What makes it holy is not *Holy, holy, holy* chiseled into the mensa, but the actions celebrated there and the promises of God imbedded in those actions. I have carved wheat and grapes into an altar only to marvel later at the redundancy of my efforts.

"Take, eat, and do not be afraid." This perfect love casts out fear. "Take, drink, and be happy." This meal, like God's peace, surpasses all understanding. It is provided by one who invites us. It is the one who invites us. Yet in the meal's design, our own labors are affirmed. We plant and harvest and grind and mash and bring the stuff of this meal to the altar, and it is Christ. It is remembrance, anniversary time, a feast of joy! It was the same also for Jesus and the disciples in the Upper Room—remembrance of the Passover, when the children of Israel stood with their staffs in their hands, loins girded, ready to move out. It is a celebration on the move. A surprising number of parishioners, however, have submitted their notices of transfer because the congregation voted not to have a rail. A moderating word is in order. It is not a "communion rail." It is actually a kneeling rail. And it is the posture of kneeling or standing that holds meaning, not the rail. Standing can mean action and celebration. Kneeling can mean reverence and adoration. Visually, however, the rail can suggest a reserved or

separated space more holy than the rest of the church room. It is much more useful to think of the sanctuary as the entire space where the congregation gathers, not only the space defined by the rail.

Consider the possibility of kneeling without a rail. You could be responsible for assisting those next to you should they wish to kneel but have difficulty in doing so. Consider the possibility of standing, even though those next to you are kneeling. The Lord invites us all to his meal—people of all ages, abilities, and disabilities. We come as we are, ready to be of service as we are served this bounteous grace.

My father says I was born with a silver foot in my mouth. This is demonstrated time and again, but never, I pray, outside the processes of concern. Bear that in mind when I confess that I see no reason not to use the common cup. Some of you are suggesting to yourselves that I stick to art and leave the logistics to the congregational councils. But we are talking about how things appear, not only *what* we believe but *how* those beliefs are verified in our behavior. Each year I worship in churches around the world. I am often struck by the assortment of systems devised to accommodate the use of individual cups. Communion rails are built to hold the empty ones, creating at the end of the meal the effect of kneeling at a busy bar. Congregations are split during the service with individual cup folks served at one time and chalice folks served at another. Some congregations try to bridge the gap by using individual cups in the form of miniature chalices.



There are some who feel that individual cups are more sanitary. Concerns for spreading cold germs during the distribution can be met by encouraging those who suspect they might have something contagious to dip the bread in the cup rather than drinking directly. We are concerned here for visual communication. The chalice speaks of a commonality, a bonding among those who drink and a common connection to the giver of all good things. Consistency would also opt for a loaf of bread rather than those quarter-sized tissue-thin wafers that bear no resemblance to bread in appearance or taste. An additional delicious element that comes with the loaf of bread is the opportunity to make it, allowing for another visible sign of the labors of the congregation participating in the sacramental life of Christ's body.

So often our attempts to explain or rationalize the mysteries we confront in liturgy get in the way. We find it hard to believe that awe and wonder can manifest themselves without a great deal of fuss. We want to orchestrate our wonder with trumpets, fountains, glass cathedrals. Maybe this is why so few expect to find wonders at the kitchen table, or the hospital bed, or a baby's crib. Yet if they cannot happen in these places, why should we expect them to occur in a church building? The essential, the simple, the meal prepared with care, the objects selected to point away from themselves and to the sacredness they hold, the family of God sharing and, in the eating and drinking, lifting each other up—this is the stuff in which the wonder works.

## THE WORD

I once discovered, by accident, a fire extinguisher in the pulpit of a Minneapolis church. The apparatus made me want to stay for a sermon.

If we took a survey of why people attend church, or what people feel is the most important part of the order of worship, the sermon would head many lists. The word-making enterprise has become so significant we have built worship spaces that have as their sole function the ministry of the spoken word. The "crystal cathedral" of Robert Schuller is, with all of its exotic flamboyance, a place designed for people to listen to a speaker. The whole phenomenon of television ministry is one that separates the sermon from the rest of liturgy and makes it, along with appeals for funds, a worship entity in itself.

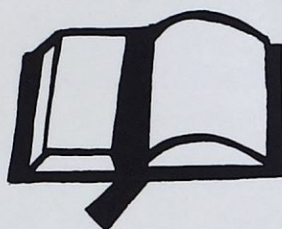
Our own worship situations also tend to isolate the sermon. Liturgy is what is happening, or so we feel, when the pastor says something and we say something in reply; versicle and response. Hymns are a part of liturgy because in the singing the congregation is allowed to participate. I hope that our definition of liturgy will expand as we read on. The problem is the sermon. We tend to separate it in many ways, visually and attitudinally, from the rest of the service. After we are invited to sit following the reading of the sermon text, the "house lights" dim, we scrunch back into the pews, and for the next 12 minutes (treat!) or 16 minutes (the preacher used his whole allotment) or 22 minutes (it isn't necessary to say everything every Sunday)



or 30 minutes (is there another congregation of this variety nearby?) we have no responsibilities other than to attend. The sermon is effectively removed from liturgy.

A story is told of a black woman who attended a service predominantly attended by whites. After the service she confronted the pastor at the door and began to console him for having preached only 15 minutes. "It's no wonder," she said, "your people didn't give you very much help." Black congregations know very well how to move the sermon into liturgy. They encourage the pastor with affirmations and repetitions of important points. Most of us are too self-conscious or feel too inadequate to minister to the minister. You can probably recall your pastor including in the sermon a rhetorical question that was immediately followed by an answer from a child in the back row that was followed by a few snickers and even a blush from the pastor. Too bad! The sermon should be understood in the context of versicle and response and the response ought to be much more than a "Good sermon, pastor" at the door.

Now what about that pulpit, with or without fire extinguisher? Books and magazine articles still insist that the pulpit is the symbol of the Word. I have always had difficulty with this, and even more in these days when the word *Word* is used in so many ways. This is not the place to extend the debate. If by *Word* we wish to mean Bible, then the book and not the pulpit is the visible symbol. If by *Word* we wish to mean how God is revealed to us, then it seems a most



appropriate symbol would be folks speaking good news to one another. You must sense that I opt for the latter meaning. With Scriptures read from many places and the good news spoken and sung from throughout the church room, symbolic significance is removed from the pulpit.

The pastor may wish to preach from the altar. A sermon can be delivered standing on the floor in front of the congregation. This might shock those who are accustomed to seeing the pulpit and "Herr Pastor" high and lifted up, directly over the altar. The sermon might be in dialog form, or even in a multi-media format. At such times, the pulpit is an unused piece of furniture, and the more elaborate it is, the more unused it looks when it is empty. Remember, we don't make something a symbol by pasting a familiar picture onto the front of it. In fact, we really do not make symbols at all. What we need in a pulpit is a place to lift up the preacher so she or he might have eye contact with the congregation and so necessary books and notes have a place to rest. When these functions are not required, a pulpit is not required.



## THE CHURCH ROOM

The instant you step inside someone's living room, you have a sense of what the folks are like who live there. Even if they have had time to get ready for you, your eyes will let you know whether they are casual or formal, wealthy or poor, family-oriented, interested in travel, art, books, junk. We should be able to sense with our eyes what the congregation is about, what business it is up to, as soon as we walk into the narthex. We should! I am afraid that most congregations would prefer to forget their uniquenesses and concentrate on how well their space compares with that of similar congregations in other places.

Worship spaces have usually been designed in one of two ways. When a building committee requires a "church that looks like a church" (and they do), they either want one that reminds the members of how church buildings used to be when they were children or a building that immediately suggests the presence of the Almighty upon entering. The phrase that describes this idea is "the house of God," the *domus dei*. There is, of course, some precedent for such a concept. What it has come to mean, however, is that the building itself might convince us of the holy. Many people still believe that Gothic design does this better than any other. One pastor, when asked what he felt was indispensable for a church room, listed stained glass, an organ, and pews. Anything else I wanted to put in was negotiable. He did not consider people, Word, and sacraments as essential elements of church design. (Although don't you sometimes suspect that all those

worshippers are preventing you from getting a better look at the stained glass?) We all have ideas of what a good worship space should look like and what it should contain. We do well to bear in mind that a church looks most of all like people.

Somehow we must create the image of worship as an intersection of the vertical and the horizontal. The celebrations of the gifts of grace should move out from the focus of our worship. To create a space that tries to capture only the spiritual is to forget or diminish the humanity that we also confirm in worship. It, in effect, cancels an essential aspect of the sacramental. It seems more appropriate, therefore, to design the worship space as a "house of God's people," a *domus ecclesiae*. This requires a space that looks empty when no one is present. It requires a space that is designed to serve the variety of our liturgies rather than only one. The manger was available, and worship and praise among the family and strangers worked just fine there.

The house of God's people is an arena. Architect Edward Sovik calls this arena a *centrum*. It is a place built around the actions of worship; the space and its appointments flex to accommodate the changes in the actions. This is a very sensitive problem, since flexibility can so often result in carelessness of design. A room that allows the family of God to bring in its art, and then remove it, that accommodates both the formal and informal, must be not so much neutral as hospitable. Its design requires much skill and sensitivity. It also demands more than



interior decoration. A purple carpet may be absolutely stunning, but it plays real havoc with the colors of the changing liturgical calendar. Many feel one cannot approach the altar except on a red carpet. The problem is the same. If carpeting is thought necessary, and it often is not, it should be warm and receptive to all else that will happen in this space. It is paramount that congregations, architects, and artists remain sensitive to the real tradition of the church's art—the tradition of continuity and change. The result of such sensitivity will be a space that requires the constant creative energies of all the members of the congregation. Properly conceived, the space will not be an end in itself, but a means for affirming the special gifts of the worshiping community and each of its members. Thus the building should never be considered complete.







## THE CHURCH BUILDING

I have deliberately left the church building to the end of our discussion on liturgy because when it comes to visualizing the church, this is where most of us begin. Building committees will very often select architects on the basis of buildings they have driven past before even questioning what their own worship needs are. I also am constantly amazed and confused by architects who conceive of very dramatic buildings only to back off when it comes to designing the liturgical space and appointments. The interior space and its appointments should probably be designed first, or at least

at the same time as the exterior. For two years I worked with a congregation whose architect designed a marvelous hyperbolic paraboloid concrete shell that looked like a great bird about to take off from a hillside. When the shell was complete, he ordered the congregation to lay out the inside. Such a conspiracy between architect and building committee could only end in frustration. I have designed worship places in storefronts, auto dealership facilities, garages, warehouses, and forests, but that concrete shell stumped me. There was no place for the altar!

The exterior of the church building is important as a means of visual communication, not only to the congregation, but even more to the strangers who pass by. The building can give the impression of fortress or of accessibility. It can be introverted as were the early basilicas or extroverted as the Gothic cathedrals. It dare not, however, be a form divorced from any difference the congregation means to make in its special place. Church buildings conceived outside of specific congregational reasons for being are irrelevant buildings, no matter how beautiful they might be. As we continually gain new insights into the meaning and work of the church, I believe we must see the building as part of its total community, not as visually isolated. Apartment complexes should have apartment church facilities. A rural church building should continue rural characteristics. A city church should embody urban design features. Thus, in its look, it gives evidence of caring for the place and people around it.





Shaky

is shattered  
by shootout

flee in fear

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras (AP) — Poor Honduran villagers fled their homes along the coast Wednesday, fearing a military retaliation based in Honduras. The residents of the Gulf of Amatique, Salvadoran border town of Amatepec, were fleeing from a military operation in the area.

Meaning of

Colon

Life

FROM THE PULPIT

churches across the nation, members of the clergy began to abandon their pulpits. What has hap-

py, obedience and chastity? And why, now, people entering the clergy later in life —

filled with foolery  
Quevill groups in Sa





## **Chapter Three**

### **Encouragement from the Church's Mission**

By now I hope you have concluded that the relationships between art and the work of the church extend far beyond the picture, the window, or the steeple. How things look must, I feel, be as important a concern as how things sound. The scriptural admonition to be glorifiers of God requires us to do nothing less than make visible what God has in mind for his creation. Glory as a scriptural event often proves less than the wonderful spectacle we might imagine. Moses hid his face in a rock; the shepherds on the Bethlehem plain were frightened. God's plan and will made visible may not be at all pleasant either to behold or participate in. Glory, in fact, may be more of a task, a risk-taking vocation, than a good feeling or emotion. This mission task can be seen as celebration, witness, and prophecy.



## THE CELEBRATING CHURCH

"And so, with the Church on earth and the hosts of heaven, we praise your name and join their unending hymn: 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord, Lord God of power and might. . . .'"

Can you imagine acknowledging that incredible fact while sitting on your hands? Why do we so often do it then—sit on our hands during times of praise? There is a moment when we gather with friends and strangers to sing a *Te Deum* or a *Sanctus* that puts us in the company of saints, martyrs, and angels. The possibility of that cannot be confirmed outside the life of faith or the promise found in Baptism's waters. Yet we take it too casually. Once, just once, I would like to see all of them, from Abel to Bonhoeffer, in a great ring around us as we sing. Next Sunday, perhaps.

How many things can we do as Christian folk that others cannot do? To forgive sins is certainly one. The special acts of worship and the nature of our celebration are others. This requires excellence, the very best of our offering. Unfortunately, as we seek to define *the best* we often get confused between what we have to offer and what we are able to buy. Perhaps we are not convinced of what we sing in the *Te Deum*. Perhaps we have never marched in an offertory procession, having the fruits of human labor blessed and shared. Knowing who we are and what we have to offer to our neighbors and the world in Jesus Christ is to recognize that *the best* is ours to give.

Our decisions as to what is or is not

appropriate are made too often out of fear. We worry about whether this or that approach is correct, this or that design is useful, this or that liturgy is relevant. To play it safe, we rely on traditions or on those tried practices that have met with least resistance. Often we utilize "experts." (An expert is anyone who comes from more than 50 miles away.) As one such expert, I often find myself speaking common sense to a congregation simply because the members prefer to have it spoken by someone from the outside, even though the same counsel was available from their own midst. *The best* is glass from France, or French glass from Chartres, a wood carving from Oberammergau, an architect from the East Coast, an organ with pipes, a pipe organ with tracker action. It is sad that our quest for the best so often leads us somewhere away from the midst of those who seek it.

The reason for this might well be our tendency to shift the act of celebration into the realm of performance. My friends in the field of church music will forgive me, I know, if I use their discipline to illustrate this shift. Many denominations are publishing new hymnals. While change is a wrenching thing, much good has come from these changes. One change in the wrong direction, however, seems to be the performance-oriented nature of these new resources. Congregational singing, we are informed, should be in unison in order to be most correct. As a result, more hymns are presented with an organ accompaniment that prevents congregational part singing. Of course,

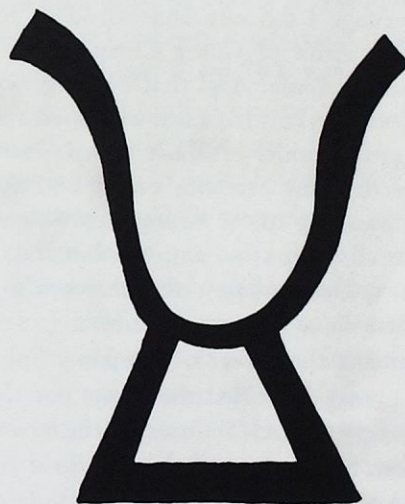


the choir sings in parts. If the congregation should sing in unison and the choir sings in parts, then when the choir sings is it singing to or from the congregation? And if it is singing to the congregation, isn't the result essentially performance?

The musicologists have a very real concern. There are few congregations that can break into hymn singing in parts without the resulting cacophony destroying the meaning of the words. And, some would argue, isn't excellent congregational singing as much performance as good choir singing? I think not. The singing of Welsh and Russian Orthodox congregations seems, in its excellence, to be a dress rehearsal for the heavenly experience that will allow for varieties of musical adequacies to participate. Perhaps I cannot imagine an eternity of unison singing, and I would like to get in some practice.

The visual arts have the same performance/celebration difficulty. Celebration allows for and encourages the gifts of everyone. Yet I wince when I see some of the appointments—banners, vestments, and paraments—that hang in church rooms. Lists of artists from around the world come to mind who could have done the work better. In the search for excellence, I am often tempted to turn the worship space into an art gallery. And naturally, no artist from the congregation could match the skills of those whose work I might recommend. What a shame! How can we protect churches from professional artists like me? And how can churches use the wonderful stuff we know and do?

I'll comment pragmatically about that in a later chapter. For now, let it suffice to say that celebration is about people, all of God's gifted people who are, in fact, all of God's people. Most of these people are still convinced that their gifts are not quite adequate to be the best we have with which to praise. Performance also is about God's gifted people, but only certain ones who by reason of training, profession, or recognition have come to be acknowledged as bearers of excellence. Churches should learn to celebrate performance, that is, make space for it and use it. But churches are primarily involved in the work of celebration, using performance as a kind of encouragement to all of us to share and offer up the very best with which we have each been blessed.

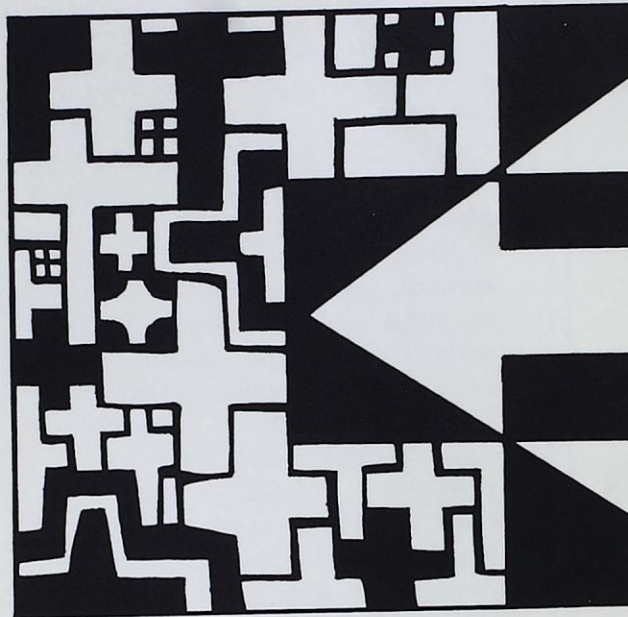




## THE WITNESSING CHURCH

A church looks like the body of Christ, living and behaving in a given place. It is a serious mistake, more so because it is so common, to begin a church building program in an attempt to increase the membership. "Nobody wants to worship in a gymnasium" has become the rallying cry for many a building committee. That may or may not be true, but I suspect very few really preferred worshipping in catacombs, either. The excellence of worship is not dependent on its environment but on those who worship. I have participated in the Eucharist on the stern of a boat plowing through an Aegean evening, in a bar in Milan, at a Galilean seashore, on a Jerusalem rooftop, beside a castle wall in Trakai, Lithuania, and in a basement in Valparaiso, Indiana. I have sung songs in a language I did not understand in an evening circle of young Christians in Tallinn, Estonia. And that evening, with the common bond of faith we shared and the gentle smiles of those that I want badly to name here but ought not to, gave meaning to the strange words, and it was all celebration and worship and witness. Demanding a church room to validate those events would be to blaspheme the power of the Holy Spirit. The events sanctified the place, not the other way around. So it was at the River Jordan. So it was at Golgotha. So it is in our gymnasiums.

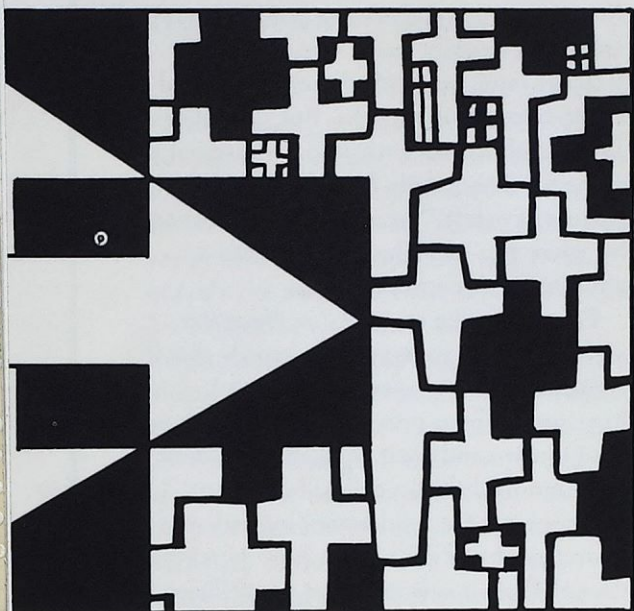
At one and the same time I want to counsel for special attention and care to building programs and yet a full awareness that the best we have built or



will ever build cannot embody the power of the new creation in Christ Jesus. No space or icon or sculpture can do that. But the making of that space, the sacramental process for painting the icon, the forming of the sculpture can be signs, as the church must be a sign, of the coming kingdom.

Witnessing is a vital experience. Earlier we noted the link between the witness and the martyr. This relationship between witnessing and dying is worth pursuing further, particularly as it relates to art. What we make and how we make it is a witness, a revelation to the community around us. Much of what we convey is an impression of struggle, of survival. Our buildings are often monuments to congregational egos. Our rituals seem bent on isolating us from the realities of the world. The finest witness we make as the body of Christ, however, is the one that





shows us dying for the world, giving up what we know and claiming it for those who have need of it. And all have need of the One to whom we belong.

What does this witnessing look like? It does not look like a facility standing empty and unused. A congregation in a small town asked me to consult with them on their new building plans. They also wished me to see their site in order to determine a suitable orientation.

I was dumbstruck when I first set eyes on the site, for it was at the town's main intersection. On three of the four corners were churches of the same denomination as the one with which I was consulting. This group wanted to complete the set—four churches of one denomination occupying four corners of one intersection. After worshiping with the congregation that had invited me, I attended a service of one of the other

three. This church building was six years old, and there were about 40 in attendance at their only service. With little information as to the politics of the situation, and going mostly on what my eyes told me, I jumped to some immediate and probably uncharitable conclusions.

Relying on what powers of persuasion I possessed, I tried during the next days to convince those two congregations to work with the existing facility, spend a fraction of the hundreds of thousands of dollars set aside for a new building on remodeling the existing one, and use the remainder of the budget for creative service projects. The congregation with the empty lot would have none of it. They, like many congregations, suffered from an "edifice complex." They felt their identity could be fulfilled in a building. In this case, that very well might have been true. But if so, that identity would not have been conformed to the mind of Christ. It would have been self-centered, puffed up, excessive, and uncaring for the poor—in a word, unloving. The look of their building enterprise would be ungodly, no matter what its design.

There is no text without context. The text of a work of art is its appearance and the responses it creates. Its context is much more complex. Each of us comes to a work bearing within us a context for viewing and understanding it. The work itself also has a context that will affect how we see it.

How many of us look at the wonderful work of Vincent van Gogh with a slightly suspicious eye because we



remember some bizarre story about him regarding his ear? That story becomes a context for the visual text of his paintings. I wish I had the time here to alter that context. There is a very real way in which we might know Vincent as a saint—Saint Vincent of Arles. Such knowledge would allow you to see his paintings differently, and that difference would not only be a celebration of Vincent's paintings but of your eyes as well.

So it is with church buildings. One day I stood in front of what was once the Lutheran church at Kaunas, Lithuania. Jonas Kalvanas, archbishop of the Lithuanian Lutheran Church, described to us his days as a student at the seminary and his first sermon preached in this church. As we looked through the slats of the boarded-up entrance, watching the renovations that would turn yet another church building in the U.S.S.R. into a facility divorced from its original

function, we watched one young workman sleepily paint over the old frescoes, and tears filled some eyes and anger filled some mouths. But "Brother Jonas" calmed us with some additional sadness. "The people have left, and the pastors have left," he said. "Don't be upset by what you see. This has not been a church for some time."

For many, the context for *church* is ownership of property and records that continually show memberships and baptisms up over previous years. For those who understand their mission to witness as a kind of dying, a call to be servant, the context for understanding what a church looks like is always how it reveals Christ. Does it side with the poor? Does it work for peace? Is it on the side of the powerless? Is Christ glorified? When these are done, all that is a visual part of those services takes on special loveliness, a witnessing loveliness and a prophetic one.





## THE PROPHETIC CHURCH

I regret the inability to move and grow simultaneously in both visual and verbal directions, especially when it comes time to extend the meaning of a work of art. I have no sympathy for those artists who won't share their thoughts and feelings outside the media of their craft, although I sympathize with their feelings of inadequacy in attempting to do so. Ben Shahn, Bennett Newman, Fairfield Porter, and others have added immeasurably to an understanding of their work and the artists' work in general by what they have said and written. Artists who can verbalize move across two different kingdoms and contribute much to the varieties of imaging necessary to convey the total meaning of *church*. But the words come hard.

When we speak of opportunities to use art for the church, most of us have a specific idea of where these opportunities might be located. Our next chapter will deal with some of them. There is a liturgical arena that calls for all sorts of art. For many of us this arena marks the boundaries of much, if not all, of our church experience. There is, however, another sphere essential to the life of God's people that needs the special attention of the artist. Because it speaks of the coming kingdom, I think of this sphere as prophetic. If I have a major fear, it is that so few see this as the church's business. Pastors should not get political in the pulpit, the "social gospel" is anathema in many quarters. The Sunday morning experience is adequate to fulfill the "doing church" obligations in an already-

chopped-up life. To spend worship time talking about the world's poor or your city's poor muddies up the whole notion of what worship ought to be. Shouldn't we be lifted up? Shouldn't Sunday morning worship make us feel good? Shouldn't it give us answers to our problems? And don't we have enough problems of our own without confronting those of the entire world? So much of our worship experience accepts and emphasizes the presence of the holy: "God is in this temple, let all within keep silence." To illustrate that emphasis, we decorate the space with a "holy other" feeling, a sense of perfection, at least as best we can manage. To this end most of the art and appointments used for worship deliberately make no visual reference to the world we confront elsewhere. The result is twofold: liturgy does not affirm the world as it should, and our life in the world is not one of continual worship as it should be.

Paul Tillich, in his book *Theology of Culture* (Oxford, 1959), says that the holy is not only that which is but that which ought to be and that which demands justice above all. It is the Anointed One who, according to the prophet, will "... bring good tidings to the afflicted ... bind up the broken-hearted ... proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor ... to comfort all who mourn" (Isaiah 61:1-2). And it is Jesus who specifically applies his own life and work to a fulfillment of that prophecy (Luke 4:18-21). In his book *Earth with Heaven* (Concordia, 1969),



Richard Caemmerer Sr. continues to describe Jesus as our link between earth and heaven and what that means for us and our time. Christ's life, death, and resurrection comprised the liberating act good for all time, but as his church, his body, we are entrusted to extend his prophetic fulfillment into our time and world. We do that, not only by telling the story, but by being acts of God through whom the kingdom of heaven comes. This is a much more vital life than the visual arts have shown us. Church buildings continue to be ornamented with lilies, boats, circles, triangles, sheep, wheat, grapes, and an unlimited assortment of crosses. Rarely, if ever, are we confronted with the visual specter of Namibia, El Salvador, Afghanistan, Uganda, South Africa, or issues of political imprisonment, starvation,

nuclear proliferation, and poverty within the context of liturgy. Rarely does worship give us the opportunity to express our love for the world by encouraging us to quarrel with its messes. Seldom does the affirmation of ourselves as God's children move on to an agenda for service and serving. Only in limited ways is a congregation brought into a global awareness. As a result, not only the worship design, but the facilities that we build to contain that design, fail to provide for our prophetic tasks.

A church in a Midwest milltown needed to build a new facility. They put a package together and sent it, with a budget statement, to an architect halfway across the country. After working together for about a year, the architect proposed an A-frame worship unit attached to their old fellowship





hall. This proposal used the entire budget. The building committee thought the solution inadequate but didn't know exactly how to proceed, so it asked for counsel. We started from scratch, after paying the architect for his services. After six months the committee wrote an entirely new proposal. To achieve this, they researched both the congregation and the community. They discovered that seventeen knifings and three rapes had taken place within two blocks of the new building site the previous year. They analyzed the poverty levels, peak unemployment periods, civic needs, and congregational preferences of building styles and added the data into the planning scheme. We then hired a local architect who had not done a great many churches but had a fine design sense. The final result was beautifully

constructed. The congregation, while not insistent on a specific style of architecture, demanded excellence and care in its forming. The worship space seats 300, but on weekdays it "collapses" to seat 20. The remaining space then converts to a day-care center, family counseling center, and even a first aid facility. Original art and chancel furnishings insure a sense of continuity throughout the design. In addition, the congregation arranged for the city to purchase its facility should the transient nature of the community ever eliminate the need for a congregation in that place. I think of this project and of the ongoing work of this congregation enabled by its facility as having a prophetic character and a prophetic look.











## Chapter Four

### Putting the Art to Working

Christ's parable of the man who prepares a great feast, then has trouble getting people to attend, certainly is a true picture of life today. Everyone has an excuse. The time in which we live provides many such excuses, and what our hectic schedules do not suggest, we invent. We would love to travel, but the children are too young. We would like to change jobs, but the pension would go down the tubes. We would like to get together, but time just won't allow. I know folks who have purchased a new house and now will not take a vacation because then their house payments would be spent on something not being used. I suspect that if we use children and job and house as excuses often enough, we will learn to resent them all. We pretend that they prevent us from doing important things and eventually they do. Thus lives are designed on pretenses, and what we own determines how we "live and move and have our being."

Our church buildings can be the excuses for lazy celebrations. I think of worship as the feast to which we are invited. Some understand at least a part of the magnificence of this occasion and bring gifts for the host. Some feel that the invitation was probably sent to the wrong address, so they do not attend at all. Some are convinced that they have nothing of significance to bring but attend for fear of offending the host. I think most of us belong in this last group, and we design our churches accordingly—for those who attend.



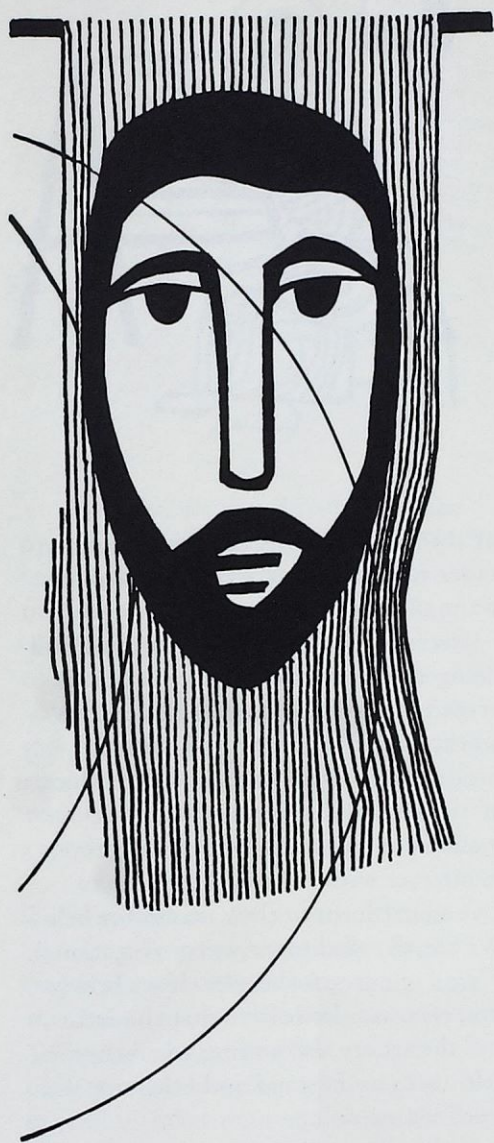
We must somehow return to the understanding of church as something to do and be, not something to attend as we do a film or ballet. Then perhaps our worship spaces will make room for working out the celebration of this banquet. For now, and for the most part, our church rooms are long boxes with row after row of firmly fixed pews, all facing a raised platform at one end on which most of the action occurs. A few do virtually all of the performing while the rest of the congregation observes. With the exception of a change in scripture readings, sermon, and hymns, the worship services and the arena that envelops them remain unchanging. Predictability can be a source of comfort, but it can also militate against celebration.

There is something good in this constancy. It is important that a body of believers has a place to develop in harmony with its special uniqueness. I live now in a wilderness environment. The sense of being involved with the whole Christian church on earth has never seemed more necessary to me. What had once been only routine and ritual now seems at the core of life, binding all of us together in great, ongoing, simultaneous praise. We are all in a wilderness of one sort or another, needing desperately that which binds us. Liturgy is more than an hour-or-two-a-week experience, but it is that as well.

Art can help us understand liturgy in its fullest sense: how it makes connections among the people of a parish and between these people and the concerns of all God's people in the wider community. Liturgy is therefore not something we find in the







worship space when we arrive; it is rather something we bring. For this reason, the best space for worship allows for the celebration of all the gifts. It is space that emphasizes the movement of people, gifts, and prayers into it and out of it. It is space that acknowledges that whatever happens there can be extended into home and school and occupation, and vice versa. And so the art moves. It is not canonized because of some arbitrary title such as "liturgical" or "ecclesiastical" or "religious" or "Christian." These titles are meaningless away from any function the art performs. The meaning and significance of an icon is derived from the liturgy. During liturgy the category of art into which the icon falls is insignificant. At the moment of Baptism there is no need to debate the merits of the bowl as art or craft, and there really is no need to debate that after Baptism either. The point is this: in worship art finds itself in a context that is its reason for being. Art's relation to that context must, I feel, be one of servant.

This is a new attitude. Ours is a time when art seems to demand being served rather than asking how it might serve. Museums are wonderful, yet it is interesting to note how little of what we see in them was ever originally intended to be there. We see art designed for palaces, homes, churches; all taken out of context and put in a place where they are viewed as "art." African masks are analyzed on the basis of their color, form, and symbolism, yet to really know them is to see them in their context of dance and music. A mask on the wall is really no mask at all.



In our time artists work primarily for their art. In prior times they worked for priests and shaman, or kings and politicians, or bankers and businessmen. One by one these groups have left the role of patron to be replaced by others, until none remains. Our age is marked to a great extent by the artist no longer working for a patron but rather developing a business out of the art product itself. Banks are now the great purchasers of art, using the work primarily as investment. Independence from patrons has caused a great momentum in the development of art styles and techniques. That is very exciting! But it creates in many people the impression of art as a product rather than a process. It also tends to divorce the work of the artist from the needs and concerns of a possible client such as a congregation. We assume from what we have heard that artists are difficult types: overly sensitive, cranky, and demanding



of their own way. A catalog is much easier to deal with; the product is all we want anyway, isn't it?

No, it is not! The business of being and doing church is a very human affair. If art is to make any sense in the church's work, it needs to affirm the human processes involved, not just the product at the end of those processes. It is incumbent on congregations, therefore, to interact with the artists they ask to give visual form to their reason for being. We are all called to serve; congregational life is a resource for service. If we believe this, then we also believe that the artist and the art are also serving when they help us to understand and celebrate the work we are doing.

Both artist and congregation will have to learn together how this can happen. Artists need to know how their work, as excellently fashioned as they are able to make it, can be used to direct attention toward the focus of worship and witness.



In that way, art can do what we also must be doing. Congregations should learn how excellence of craft and uniqueness of vision can be used to direct all eyes and hearts toward matters of eating, drinking, washing, and witnessing. In the processes of learning this from the best talents they can find, they also will discover the beauty and resources in their own midst necessary for carrying on this good work.

Talking about art as servant rather than property confuses many people. It makes art seem like a living thing, and that runs counter to common attitudes. Thinking of the worship space as continually changing with art as moveable rather than monumental threatens many artists' ideas of what is important or significant. When I talk to artists about the portable, changeable, and disposable, many express concern about the reduction in the need for their skills. They see the visual

elements executed by well-meaning but ill-equipped members of the congregations. They fear a great "cult of the amateur" will fill every nook and cranny of the worship space with trinkets and kitsch.

We have all succumbed to the notion that art for religious places ought to be "religious." We have in our mind's eye an image of what is appropriate and what is not. As our idea of liturgy expands to include all we know of the world, our ideas of what is appropriate in liturgical art also will grow. As congregations involve themselves in the making of their own art for their own needs, the role of art, the varieties of art forms, and the need for the special insights of those whose lives are devoted to imaging is expanding. As we concern ourselves with renovation, remodeling, and better utilization of existing spaces, the need for the best creative energies has never been greater. And this need extends to all of the visual arts.



## FIBER ARTS

Although I mistrust the word *renaissance* as it applies to contemporary involvement in the arts, it might very well apply to the resurgence of activity in the fiber arts. Fiber artists are investigating the traditional forms of weaving, quilting, stitching, and plaiting and taking them from the past into all manner of contemporary forms. Probably no media suit the idea of the portable as do the fiber arts, although they are equally suited for monumental work. Tapestries and other techniques of executing wall hangings are used in permanent installations in worship spaces while at the same time new banner, vestment, and parament concepts are being devised in ever-increasing variety.

The popularity of banners is both a blessing and a curse. The cry seems to have gone up across the land, "When in

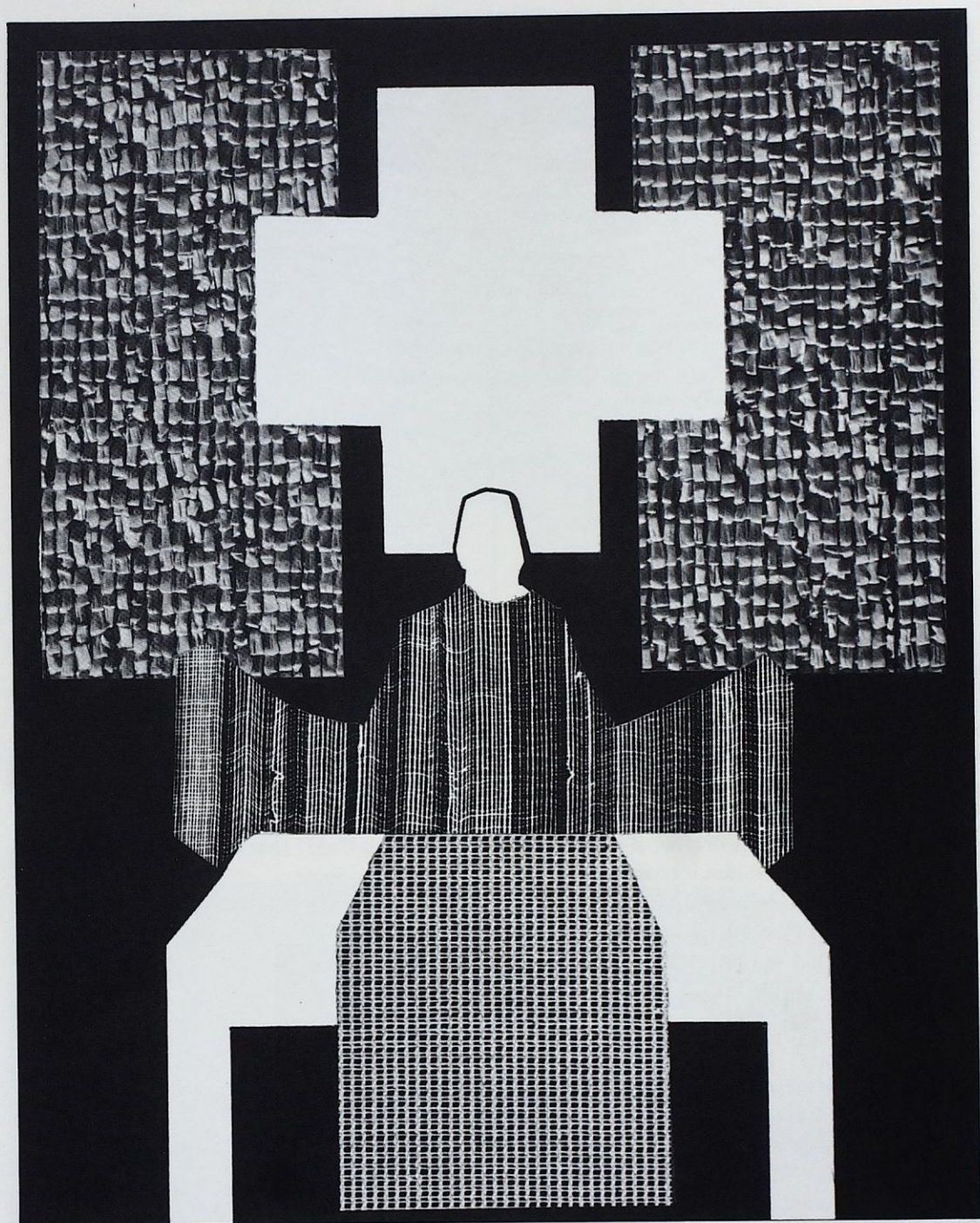
doubt, make a banner!" There are, of course, many other ways to add color and change and meaning, but banners are the most popular.

I believe a banner should move. It should process. It should dance! Nail it to a wall and it's a wall hanging. A banner should come in and go out. A banner with *Alleluia* written on it can be buried in a hole dug in front of the church before the first Lenten service. Then, before the Easter morning service, it is dug up, resurrected, brushed off, raised on a pole, and carried, dirt and all, at the head of the Easter procession.

Banners are to emphasize events and moments and ideas. Banners are not to be collected. They are not all to hang at once so that we might choose which we like best. Banners are not for competition. While they might express the sensitivity of their creators, they are for one event or one season. When the event or season is over, banners are put away.

I have seen fiber artists from across the country assemble to share their skills and experiences and to confront new ideas. Among the artists represented were weavers of vestments and paraments, dyers of silk banners, quilters of wall hangings illustrating a congregation's history, and sculptors of enormous fiber forms for a chancel wall. I want to encourage congregations to develop forms, symbols, and skills with which they might visualize their special services. Now is the time for each congregation to seek out the fiber artists in their communities, rejoice in their marvelous talents, and use their work and their counsel.









## WOOD

When certain names in church art are mentioned, one automatically thinks of wood: names like Riemenschneider, Barlach, Flaten. The totem of the Northwest Indian and the ancestor figures and masks of West Africa are examples of the traditional relationship between wood and ritual. The character of this material speaks universally of growth, of the created world, of rootedness. In the hands of sensitive imagers, it can reveal the presence of the Almighty fleshed in matter. Although I have seen crosses executed in every conceivable (and a few that were inconceivable) material, the subject seems to call for wood. Even the flash of light reflected from a metal processional cross seems to contradict the idea intended. A friend of mine carves beautiful wooden bowls. Using directives from worship committees, he has executed a number of

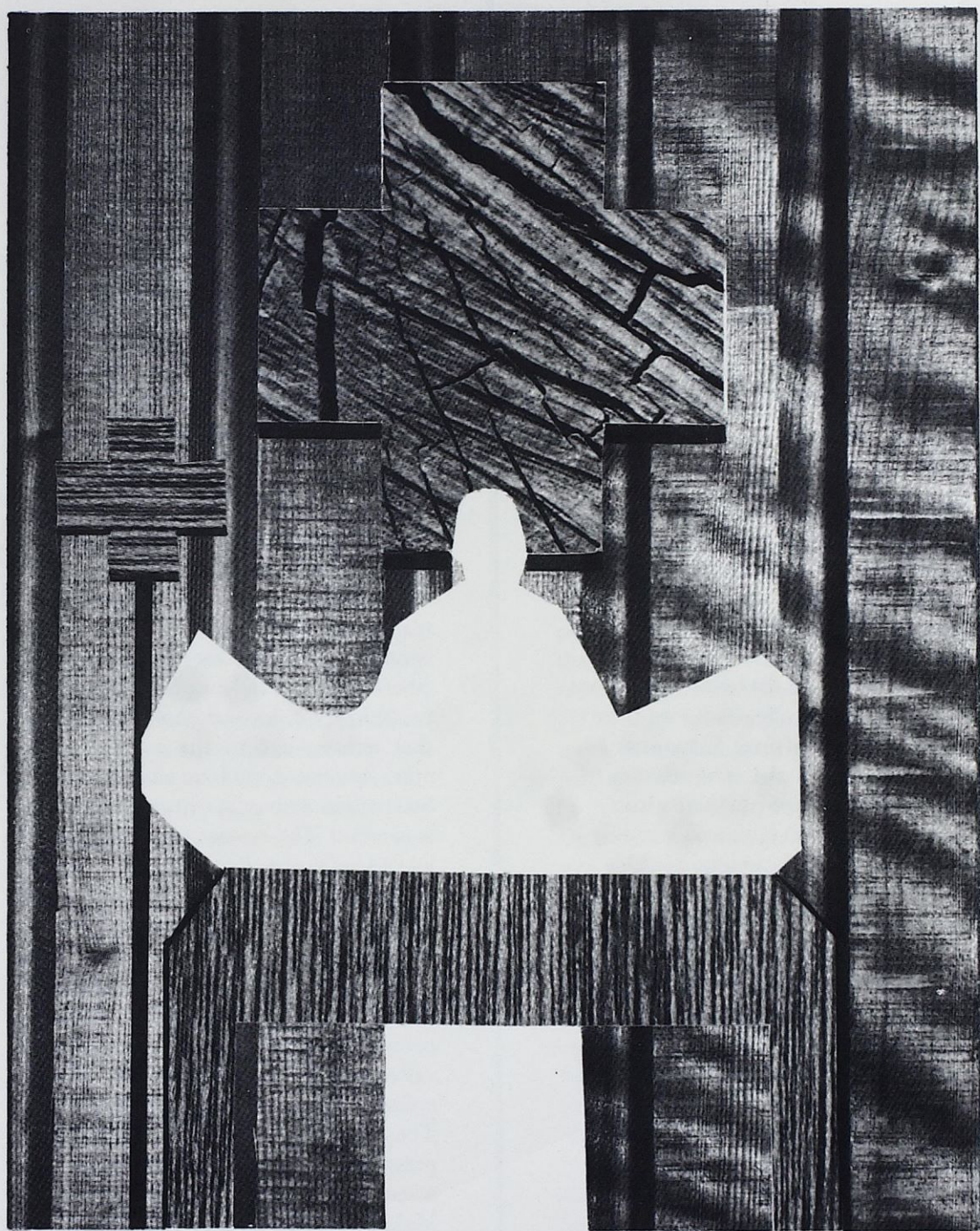
excellent patens used for communion bread. The carved wood beautifully complements the bread, and the two elements belong to the same visual idea.

Even carved wooden signs can make a powerful witness. In a round church in Minnesota, Arnold Flaten carved a ring of saints' names, dramatically adding graphic meaning to the concept of "communion of saints." A blessing or admonition over the door to be seen as parishioners leave the church room is an excellent place for a last reminder of the work for which worship prepares us. I have seen over main exits small carved signs of good design that say "Servant's Entrance" and "You Are Entering Your Mission Field" that both delight and make a serious point.

Whenever custom and catalog seem to dictate the use of bronze or brass, consider the warmth of wood.









## CERAMICS

Nothing excites me regarding new possibilities for art in worship quite as much as the use of ceramics. Technical developments in the medium are producing forms and colors in infinite variety. As we must with all art and artists, we look for the best—for persons who can translate our needs into form through their crafting. Sometimes the best is within the congregation. Sometimes, however, the best artist available may often be found, not only outside the congregation, but outside the field of religious art altogether. A monumental exterior ceramic mural for a church in Iowa was executed in collaboration with Jim Halvorson of Bloomington, Indiana. Jim is an outstanding production potter whose only previous "religious" artwork consisted of a few chalices and a baptismal bowl. I believe that it is incumbent upon congregations, as celebrators of creation, to make space for this, to push artists into forms of

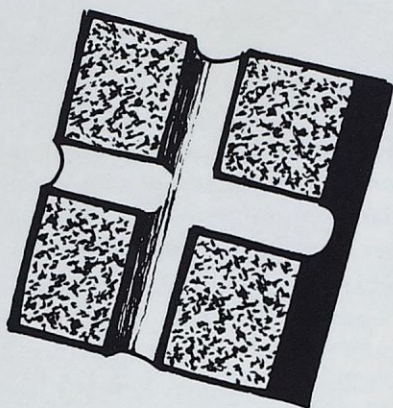


expression not previously attempted. In that way, congregations and artists walk the risking edge together.

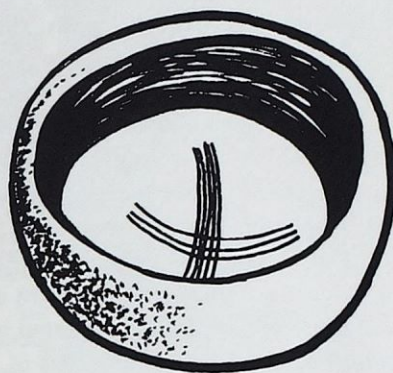
The use of ceramics in the liturgical space is increasing rapidly. I am not opposed to the use of metals for chalices, ciboria, patens, and bowls. I am opposed to arbitrary rules and choking habits that militate against the possibility of other options. A ceramic chalice is not better than a silver one simply because it is ceramic. The reverse also is true. And, while I will insist all my life on excellence of craft, I must always remember Bethel as a reminder that excellence comes in many forms.

Bethel is a town near Bielefeld in the German Federal Republic. The great percentage of its inhabitants are disabled, suffering from very serious birth defects, epilepsy, and other debilitating illnesses. The remainder are highly skilled medical personnel who care for the sick. A seven-week tour of Europe and the Middle East that I took to study the





history of Christian art ended at Bethel, primarily because of the extensive program of art therapy carried out there. While visiting, a number of our group had the opportunity to see one man, hands distorted and bent in upon themselves, leaning over his table laboriously forming a pinch pot. Another man, wearing the padded helmet of the epileptic patient, took these small crude pots from a drying rack and slowly painted them and dipped them in buckets of glaze. At the end of our visit, these two men presented our group with a finished pot: a small blue bowl with dabs of white, irregularly indented where gnarled fingers pushed into the moist coils. That evening, our last of the tour, the 40 members, who had at the outset declared themselves a congregation, celebrated the Lord's Supper. The little blue pinch pot was the chalice. It would not have been possible to substitute the finest jeweled chalice for that little pot. The tears we all shed during that celebration were not



out of pity for the potters. We were, I believe, understanding more clearly than we ever had the grace, the blood, the God who died for us all. Those two bent potters were servants to that grace, and shapers of our tearful joy. The pot was most assuredly excellent.

Ceramics is formed earth. It can thus speak in earthen ways about earthen matters. When we acknowledge our burial with Christ by baptism into death, are we not confessing a water, earth, and wood event? A large ceramic bowl full of water, a cruciform incised in the bottom, a wooden base to support it—these seem the stuff of fonts. Or consider—ceramic tiles, each painted by a member or family and signed with their names; a wall built tile by tile, member by member, name by name, never finished; changeable ceramic pieces, using Velcro fasteners, making a processional cross adapt to the liturgical seasons; clay shaped on the altar itself into a chalice to be used by that worshiping community.



## MULTI-MEDIA

I have stated an aversion to the idea of worship as theater. By this I mean the traditional audience-performance arrangement. At the same time, I feel strongly that what is important in good theater can also be very important in liturgy. The use of color, vestments, and speech projection are not treated as carefully as they should be. A higher level of theatrical awareness would help us all become more involved and interested in worship. For example, the number of people who read scripture lessons as though what they are reading is interesting to them, much less understood by them, is minimal. The percentage seems not to improve among those with seminary training or even among ordained clergy. Practice in interpretive reading and projection would aid greatly in focusing attention on this part of liturgy.

Worship *is* multi-media. You don't need projectors or tape players connected to huge speaker systems. If you have speech, music, and a cross together in one event, you *have* multi-media. Our attention can be captured and our involvement enlisted in various ways that have roots in theater. The mime, the juggler, the dancer, and the clown are ideal vehicles for enriching our coming together. These also should be used to carry our liturgies to the street. They can confront worshipers even before they enter the worship space, but they can also lead the congregation from that set-apart place back into the larger community. They can perform an evangelical role by apprehending the total

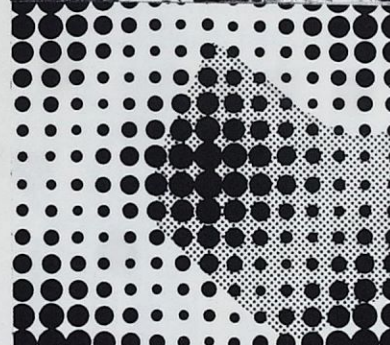
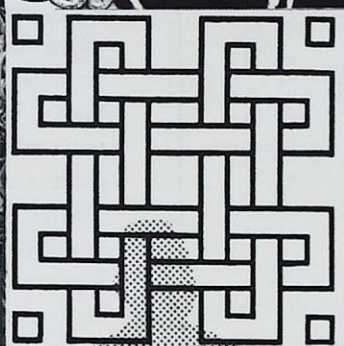
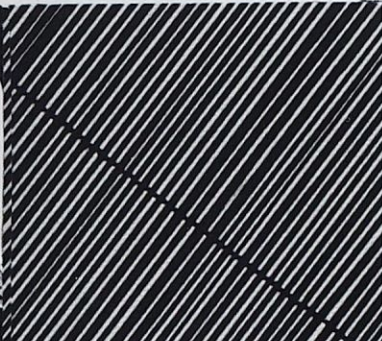
community and confronting it with the church's message and concern.

Most existing worship spaces are not suited for multi-media in its traditional meaning, that is, combined film projections and taped or live sound accompaniment. Large windows need to be darkened, projectors set up in the center aisle with extension cords strewn about, collapsible screens set into a chancel obviously not designed to accommodate them. The whole arrangement can be very messy, if it can be done at all. And all that equipment tends to reinforce the idea of worship as a spectator sport.

Good use of multi-media in all of its aspects requires a space designed with it in mind. This can include rear screen projection or an enclosed projection room, a room that can be darkened or dimmed, and lighting to accent dramatic presentation. It is very difficult to add all of this to existing facilities, but it needn't be costly or complicated if worked into building or remodeling projects at their conception. Is it worth the effort?

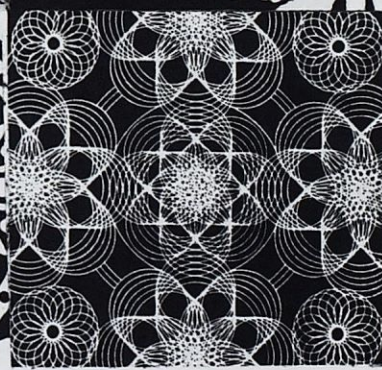
The use of projected images in worship can make very concrete what, if only verbalized, might remain an abstraction. At a pastor's conference in Michigan we elected to celebrate the Eucharist in a large classroom rather than the chapel because the classroom was more conducive to the use of multi-media equipment. The homily consisted of images and sounds but no words. Images with words continued during the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Among the images were photos depicting the starvation in Uganda, Chad, Somalia, and other of





remains as it has been stated, there is a chance of an agreement," said Gromyko, who is also first deputy premier. "Therefore, it would be a good thing if the U.S. administration adopted a more objective attitude of meeting the requirements of equal security and taking into account all the legitimate interests of the Soviet Union and the other countries" of the Warsaw Pact.

It was the Kremlin's first official reaction to the U.S. compromise since it was offered to Soviet arms negotiators in Geneva, Switzerland on Tues-





the world's poverty areas. The screen was immediately above the altar-table. As they attended, communicants "interfered" with the projected pictures, superimposing their own likenesses onto the likenesses of the world's starving. The resulting visual Eucharist was a meal shared in concern and love with those who have no food.

A youth group from Chicago went through its community on a Saturday morning taking slide photos. That afternoon they developed and mounted the slides in the kitchen of the fellowship hall. That evening they scripted a service and added taped music and appropriate hymns. The next morning they presented the entire service.

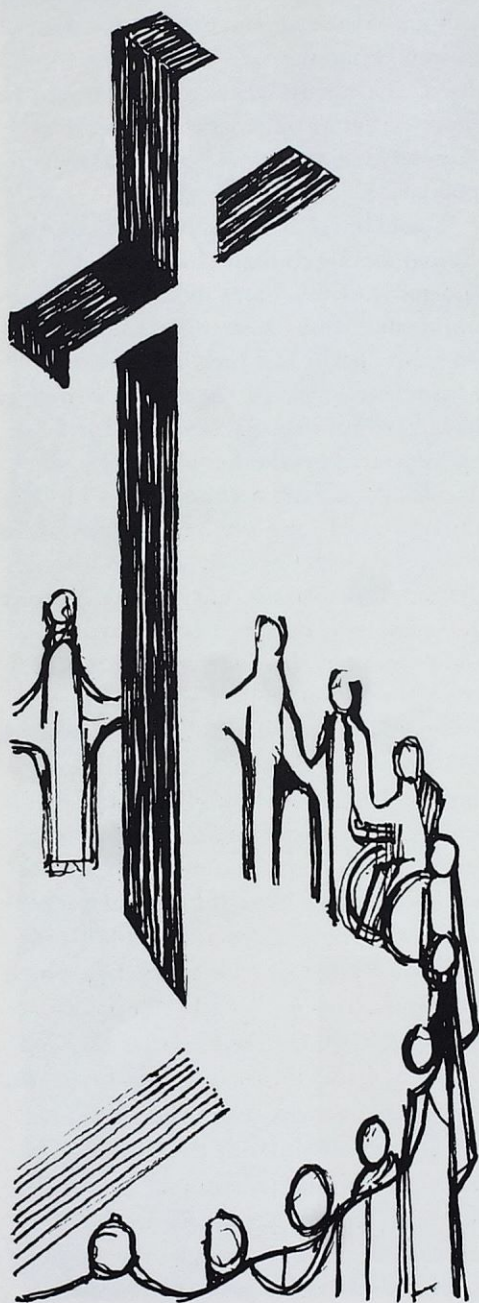
The use of photography, mechanically reproduced music, mime, and dance are vital ways of extending our means of praise. Their use requires acquaintance and practice. They might take on more significance if not done over and over but in conjunction with special events. I recall the first time I danced the Tripudium, a very old liturgical dance done by the congregation. We walked to the center aisle, met our "partners" coming from the opposite side, and proceeded arm in arm toward the altar; three steps forward, one step back; three steps forward, one step back. (It has been suggested by those who require symbolic content in every aspect of liturgy that the three steps forward honors the Holy Trinity, the one step back refers to the budget.) The service was on the Festival of All Saints, the location was Germany, and the members of the congregation were from many countries and spoke

many languages. What we signed with our bodies in the dance spoke dramatically and clearly and was, in fact, the one moment in the service when we were all able to "speak the same language."

Perhaps it is the story of Babel's tower that convinces me of the difficulties of relying solely on the verbal for communication. Perhaps it is my own difficulty with verbalizing. So often events and images that seem understandable by themselves are made confusing by explanation. Does the verbal become too specific, too particular? (Some suggest Luther was correct to ask in the Catechism, "What does this mean?" but that he shouldn't have given the answers.) The word-making enterprise is crucial in worship and witness. It therefore needs the support of many media so that its range, impact, and drama can be reinforced and extended.







## DISPOSABLE ART

That sounds trashy, doesn't it? *Disposable* can refer to something we might throw into the garbage after we have finished with it. It might also mean the making of art out of materials normally thrown away. (Has anyone made a banner out of pull tabs yet?) It can mean taking a work of art out of the realm of possession and property. All of these definitions can apply to art that is appropriate to worship and witness. Attitudes might have to change however, before the possibilities for disposable art can be fully developed.

It is impossible to say from day to day towards what aspect of world concern we should direct our attention. Our attention might need to be focused on one aspect at one moment, then redirected at the next. This constant shifting, requiring a visual statement relevant and useful for only a moment, alters traditional concepts of art. We prefer to think of art as permanent, requiring weeks and months and even years to execute. This makes it difficult to accept seriously a work that might have been made the day before the worship service.

Art objects unquestionably contain an element of status, and this makes it hard for congregations to think of a work as useful for one event and then disposable. As a result we build storage spaces in which to house our banner collections, our cross assortments, our paraments and vestments. Worship spaces become art galleries because, to justify the expense, our choice, and the bronze plaque attached to the bottom, we feel the need



to exhibit as much as we own and own as much as we exhibit.

One small paragraph in one thin book will not change years and years of habit, but I would like to see all of our portable arts disposable. All the art not built into the fabric of the architecture ought, I believe, to be disposable. We should feel free to exchange our things with other congregations, or even give them away.

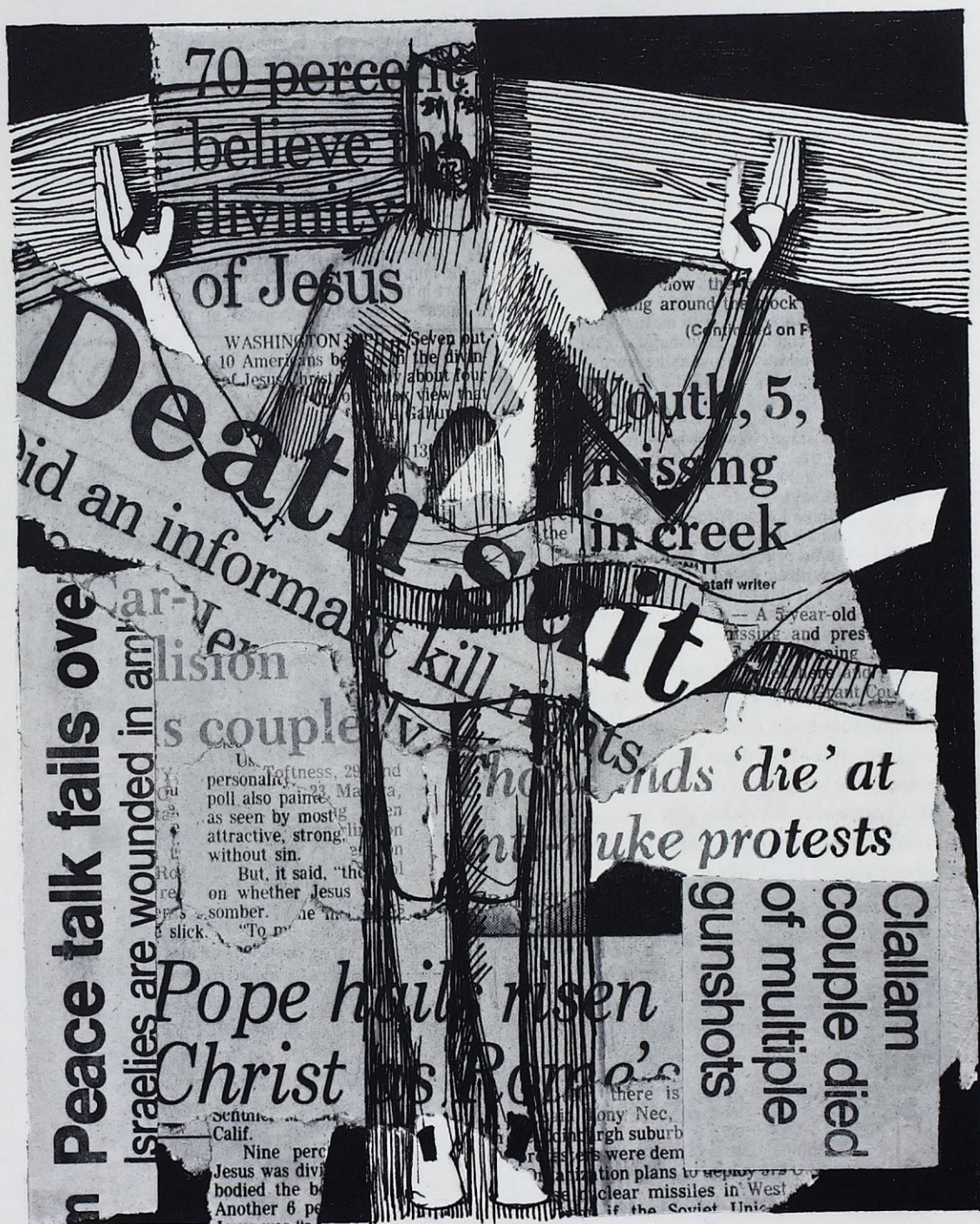
Here I am reminded, however, of the plight of the pastor of a small mission congregation who had evidently placed an ad in a magazine asking for gifts of worship aids. The assortment of secondhand, often ill-conceived and poorly executed banners that besieged the poor parish created a real dilemma—how to say “thanks, but no thanks.” Don’t give anything away that you don’t want to keep. This will insure two things: that what you give is worth receiving, and that your desire to keep things is not getting the better of you.

Which is of more value for Baptism, the water or the font? The water, obviously. But what do you do with the water after the ritual? What do you do with the font? What happens to the bread and wine? What happens to the chalice and paten? Our carved pulpits remain after the words spoken from them have been scattered and “disposed of.” Our elegant buildings stand lovely and empty while the church moves about the community sharing what it learned and practiced in worship. Whether we acknowledge it or not, much of what we use in our life of faith is disposable. And, it would seem, it is the elements of God’s grace that fit that category, while the immovable,

permanent stuff is what we concoct, or purchase, or install as vehicles for carrying that grace. We must not allow this immovable, permanent stuff—fonts, pulpits, buildings—to become the essential elements of faith. They might be more reflective vehicles if they were as disposable as the grace to which they point.

The chancel cross and Christus at the Valparaiso University chapel are enormous. They stand monumental and immovable, fine pieces of art excellently done. In order to fit the work to the liturgical formats of the chapel, hangings have been created, particularly for Lent and Easter. For one Lenten season we decided to stretch a three-foot-wide by thirteen-yard-long piece of purple fabric down the chapel’s center aisle and invite the university community to attach to it personal signs, images, prayers, symbols, and possessions that indicated where the community was, collectively and individually, at that time. In one evening 800 people participated. The following day the banner was hung over the sculpted Christus. During that Lenten season, much conversation centered around whether some things that people attached were appropriate. While a few spent their energies trying to define which attachments were “worthy,” others defended it all, contending that the God who died took all that is us into his death. Still others, caught up in the concept, added more material to the banner. The entire worshipping community eventually became involved, not simply in the art-ness of the work, but in the meaning to which it visually gave reference. On





70 percent  
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WASHINGTON, Sept. 13 — Seven out of 10 Americans believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ, according to a survey by the Gallup Organization.

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Easter eve, after the vigil, the banner was gilded so that in the Easter morning sun it shone—all the stuff of our disputes and frustrations and even joys covered over as in one combined statement of praise and thanksgiving.

There was, of course, nothing to do with the banner after the Easter cycle but to burn it. How foolish it would have been to save it for the following Easter. The Easter banner covered a Lenten banner which itself applied to certain people at a certain time. The entire work came from specific need and thereby involved people in specific ways. It communicated through the context of those needs and ways. To save it for another time would be to use it not as art but as art object. Its burning was, in fact, the natural extension of its life.

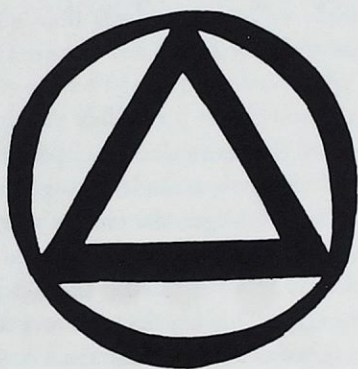
A discussion of disposable art should include the use of names—the most recognizable sign of who we are. The members of our congregation are actually more disposable than our art. Strange, isn't it, how quickly we get used to the absence of one who has transferred. We accept a reasonable attrition rate among our membership. A similar attrition rate among our things is totally unacceptable. Naming the names of our people will help convey their importance to us, an importance that should be at least equal to that we give to our paraphernalia. In those moments of worship where we focus on specific people whose names are mentioned, display their names visually as well. At baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals, we can name the names as an affirmation of the event and then dispose of the work or give it, if

appropriate, to the individual named. A small banner for the newly baptized or the married couple might be a gift from the congregation. A congregation in Washington has a large baptismal banner that allows for a small banner to be attached by snaps. The small banner bears the name of the baptized and is removed and given to the sponsors during the rite.





Of all the disposable art we confront regularly, perhaps the most obvious is the bulletin. Congregations may order the National Park Series, the Genre Series, (mothers, dogs, and flower arrangements), the Animal Series, and others. Because they are so easy to order, and so



disposable, graphics are not taken as seriously as they should be. We assume that bulletin covers should be ordered, along with Sunday school curriculum and fund-raising promotional literature. But no producer of bulletins, however well intentioned, can relate to all the needs and concerns of a congregation or community as well as the people who are *in* that congregation or community. The relevance of the material and the involvement of the congregation might be improved if congregations produced some of this material themselves. A few of them do. Six congregations in one moderate-sized town pool their printing equipment in a single location and, under the supervision of a graphics designer, produce all of their printed matter, including stationery.





"...whatever is true, whatever is honorable,  
whatever is just, whatever is pure, what-  
ever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there  
is any excellence, if there is anything  
worthy of praise, think about these things."

P H I L I P P I A N S 4 : 8

It is a puzzle why one of the most beautiful of art forms, calligraphy, is so widely ignored as an aid to worship and witness. I am not referring simply to the indiscriminate use of Old English typeface, but the use of calligraphy to interpret the words in a specific context. The calligrapher is a highly trained artisan whose skills reverence the text. Calligraphers understand and interpret the words they design just as Cezanne understood and interpreted the trees he painted. The use of the calligrapher's art in the production of service books, bulletins, logos, posters, and banners adds a sense of care, delight, and meaning to the extensive word-making facet of ministry.

One of the more dramatic processional crosses I've seen was made of huge thorns. At the Easter Vigil, the thorns were burned and the ashes saved for the imposition of ashes on the following Ash Wednesday. This breaks with a tradition of using palm branches for the ashes but makes a moving visual connection between Christ's death and our penitential discipline.

The processional cross burned, the banner given away, the name spelled out for a specific event, communion vessels shared with another congregation, worship space used for an event of public benefit—all include elements of giving up, giving away. As giving birth is a kind of dying, as creating a work of art is a kind of dying, as saying "good-bye" is a kind of dying, so is the giving away of something you treasure. It is also a liberating experience; one I wish for every congregation.



## EVERYTHING IN ITS PLACE

As we consider how art serves both worship and witness, visualize the imaging and worship spaces facing inward to the focus of worship and at the same time facing outward to the community and world. The worship space has been described in many terms, but I think an accurate depiction must include this dual direction. It has been described as an intersection with traffic coming from all directions, meeting, then moving out again. Another description emphasizes the intersection as a convergence of the vertical and the horizontal. A simile I like compares the act of worship with the action of the heart, circulating the life-giving fluids and thus assuming the responsibility for distributing them to the farthest boundaries of the body. The image of a simultaneous sense of in and out, up and down, back and forth, inhaling and exhaling should be helpful in understanding the design of the church room as more than an introverted enterprise.

An aid to visually and physically achieving this sense of in and out might very well be a narthex of a proportion healthier than most. If there is a major trend in contemporary church architecture, it is the dramatic increase in the size of the narthex. In remodeling older buildings, two major concerns are the moving of the congregation around the altar and increasing the narthex size. While not a work of art in itself, this narthex space can be a visual statement—establishing an environment conducive to worship, allowing a warm space for people to meet and talk, even providing

room for classes, meeting, lounging, and reading. Such a space can serve as overflow for worship, and some spaces are now equal in seating capacity to the worship space. We are probably more familiar with this type of narthex however—an area about 10 feet by 10 feet with a steep flight of steps dropping from its door onto a sidewalk at a heavily trafficked intersection. Folks are shoved out the door, down the steps, and into traffic because there is no other place for them to go.

A properly designed narthex can be used to celebrate some of the gifts of the members. Members of a given congregation may enjoy painting, needlework, ceramics, working in varieties of materials as hobbyists and even as professionals. It is not necessary for this work to have liturgical significance or even religious content for the congregation to celebrate it by giving it space. Space could be set aside for an artist-of-the-month. A family-of-the-week could be featured, showing pictures of the family, where it lives, the work it does, the recreation it enjoys. This, of course, should not be just for families. Single people should be thus honored as well. Groups divided by vocation, interest, or services could have visual representation in the narthex. People from the community, even those who are not necessarily members of the congregation, could share the narthex and share their talents as well. Prints of the artwork of famous masters could be displayed and rotated here. There is so much to learn from all of the creative processes that such a space set apart by the congregation can



be considered an investment in growth, learning, and affirmation.

It might seem that we are giving such value to the movable and disposable arts that the architectural arts ought to be considered of lesser value. This isn't so. But just as we are rethinking the forms and uses of the movable arts, we should do as much for those built into the architectural fabric.

Without question, the most dramatic of architectural arts media is glass. The traditional concept of light as the surest sign of the presence of God, together with the sacramental aspect of our design in glass hung before the Almighty's light which is turned on and off at his command, makes this material special in the history of art's relationship with Christian worship.

Many contend that you can't have a truly meaningful worship space without stained glass. We must constantly remind ourselves that people, gathered in Jesus' name, are the only mandatory element for worship. But, when used effectively, stained glass can direct our attention to the reason for our assembly.

Of all the places stained glass can work, the chancel might be the least effective, particularly behind the actions of liturgy. To discover why this is true, I would encourage you to try this little exercise. Hold your hand in your lap and study it. Then slowly bring it up before a sunlit window or a strong light source as you continue to look at it. Notice how your hand changes, both in its dimensional quality, from a round form to a flat shape, as well as its color quality, from natural skin tone to a dark gray silhouette. This is

what happens when liturgical action takes place in front of glass—it flattens and darkens, losing a great part of its humanity. The glass assumes visual dominance over liturgical action. Art thereby negates the reason for its existence. This can cause a distortion from both the art and worship points of view.

Until recently the use of stained glass has been directed inward, toward the worship space. The great windows of Chartres appear as gray masses from the exterior. New technical developments now allow glass to make a visual impact from both the inside and outside. That's good! It demonstrates a concern for lifting up the community, sharing the good news. Glass imbedded in epoxy resin can be seen as color on the inside and sculptured form on the outside. The great glass Bethlehem Star of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Saginaw, Michigan, shines golden on the worshipers yet projects as a sculptured logo to those who pass by.

Traditional glass technique can also make reference to the community even when it is only readable from inside. St. Peter's Lutheran Church of Mishawaka, Indiana, has two large windows at the rear of the church, visible only as worshipers exit. These windows depict a map of Mishawaka, thus encouraging the members to celebrate what they have brought with them to worship and where they will go with what worship has given them.

Stained glass is an architectural element and should be designed in conjunction with architectural concerns and solutions. It is not to be considered an afterthought,



even though the congregation might not intend to install the glass until years after the building is completed. I often counsel congregations not to install the glass immediately but to wait until the high-priority elements are installed. Nothing attracts donors and memorial funding quite so much as a stained glass window. Too often the windows are purchased before the appointments necessary for worship. A number of congregations have followed my recommendation and have attached window budgets to special mission budgets, refusing to purchase glass until a like amount of monies is collected for community and/or world mission projects.

I question more and more the use of architectural arts as a means of incorporating representational imagery into the worship space. Glass has become the vehicle for bringing whole catalogs of symbols before the congregation. Then booklets are published describing the symbolism to insure that no viewer adds meaning not originally intended. It is much better that these images be brought in and taken out as they are needed, and that glass be used to create a unifying visual statement that will enhance rather than compete with the changing orders of worship. We are working now on glass banners that can be installed over clear glass windows and changed with the seasons. But the monumental windows depicting the life of Christ, the great carved Christus over the altar table, the mural painted on the chancel wall showing Christ the Good Shepherd, or the Pantocrator, or the lover of little



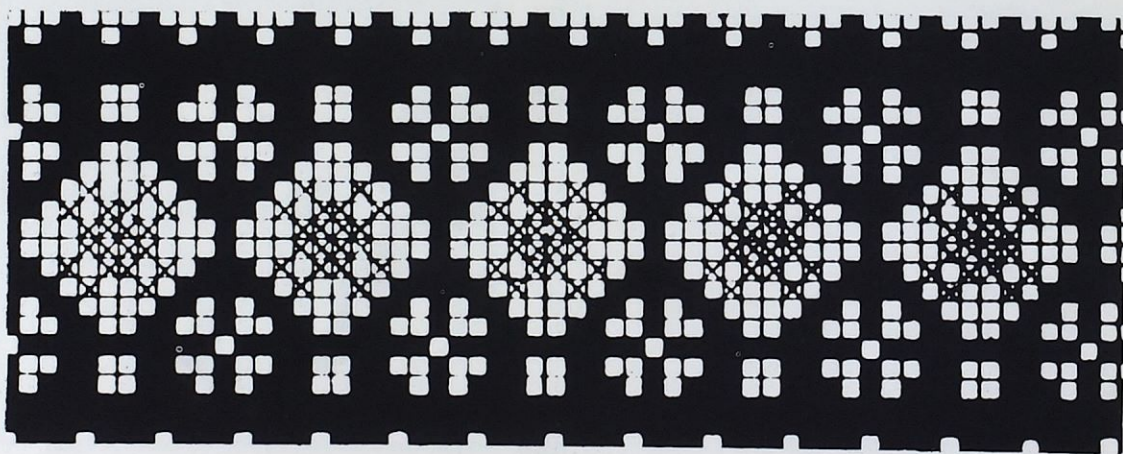




children all seem to fight against the work of the liturgy which allows for all the gifts of all the people in a constantly changing round of work and rework. The monumental mural, wood carving, and stained glass window may still be appropriate for today's places of worship. That debate continues. If they are useful, however, it is as definers of architectural and spatial character.

It disturbs me to listen to those who decry the lack of excellent art created for religious communities. They point to a Matisse in France, a Rothko in Texas, a Nevelson in New York as examples of the few worthy of mention. Such criteria

for excellence do not take into account the context of worship. A work of art, they contend, is supposed to contain within itself all that qualifies it for excellence. As a result, the definers of excellence prefer examples in which the space was designed for the art object rather than the object for the space. No wonder that multipurpose worship spaces are anathema to such critics. They cannot conceive of excellence in art that serves, only in art that must be served. Their concept of an ideal church building committee would be one consisting of an architect, a painter, a sculptor, and an art critic. The final result could very well be



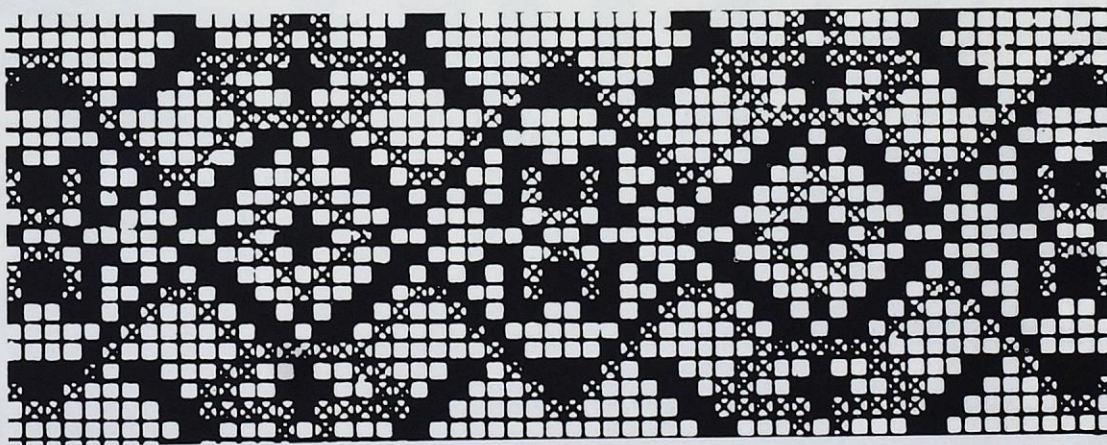




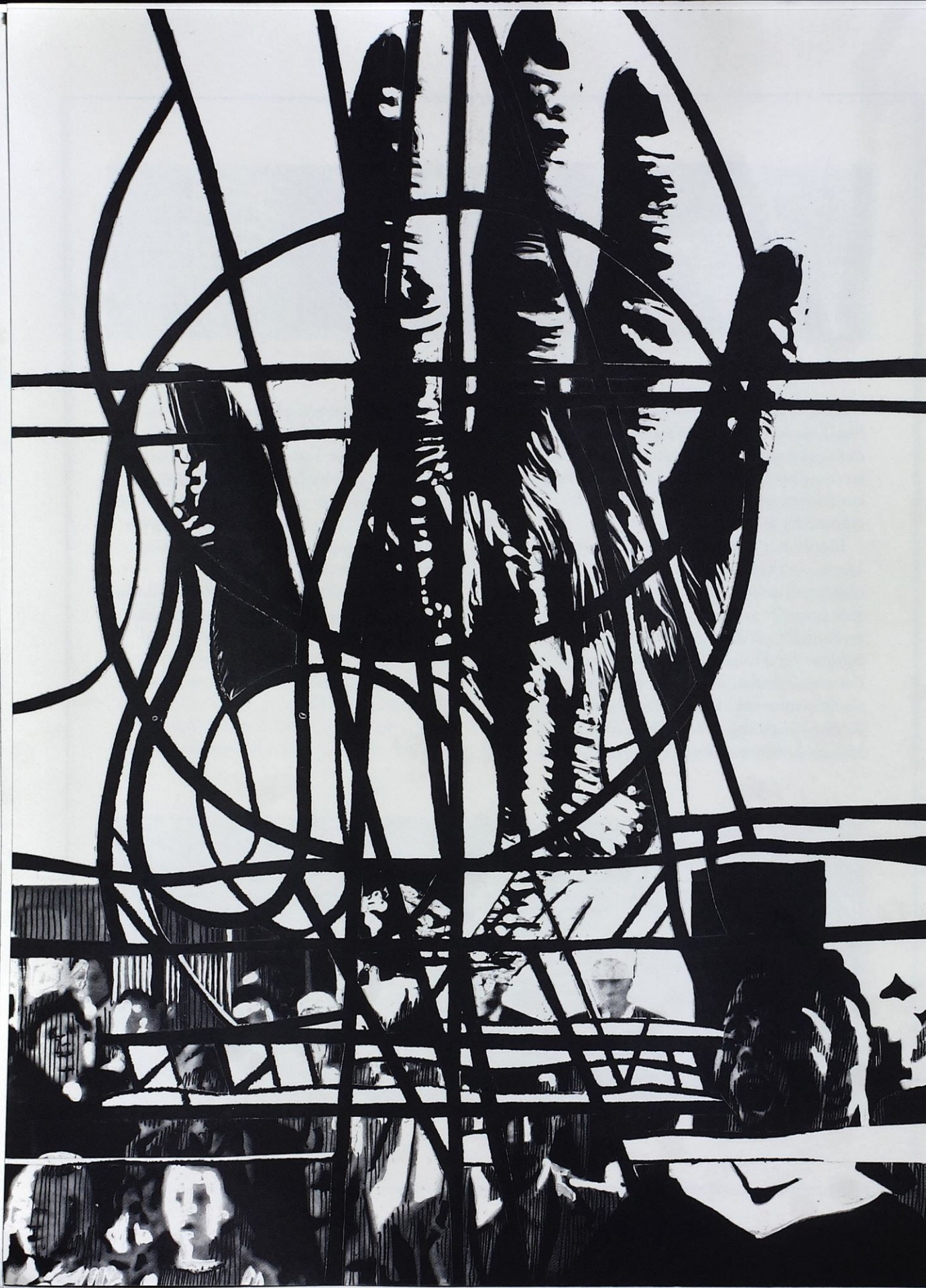
magnificent, thoughtful, and tasteful. But I suspect that it might be an example more of interior decoration than an environment in which the tasks of praise, confession, remembrance, and commitment are enacted.

Please don't misunderstand! I *want* a Matisse in the worship place. I recommend *Composition with Red Cross* for Easter morning. Or Gauguin's *Yellow Christ* or Rouault's *Christ Mocked by Soldiers* for Holy Week. Or Van Gogh's *Patience Escalier* for a hot summer Sunday morning. Or a Navajo carpet, an African sculpture, a Russian icon, a Hispanic-American *nacimientos*, an Ernst

Haas photograph. However, I do not advocate a space designed solely to honor these works or a congregation that owns them (such a budget!), but a space designed so that art might honor the Lord we honor and a congregation open to the use of all forms of visual expression to aid its praise. The excellent is available in abundance. It is defined by the quality of our adoration, not the name of our artist.











## Chapter Five

### Putting the Congregation to Working

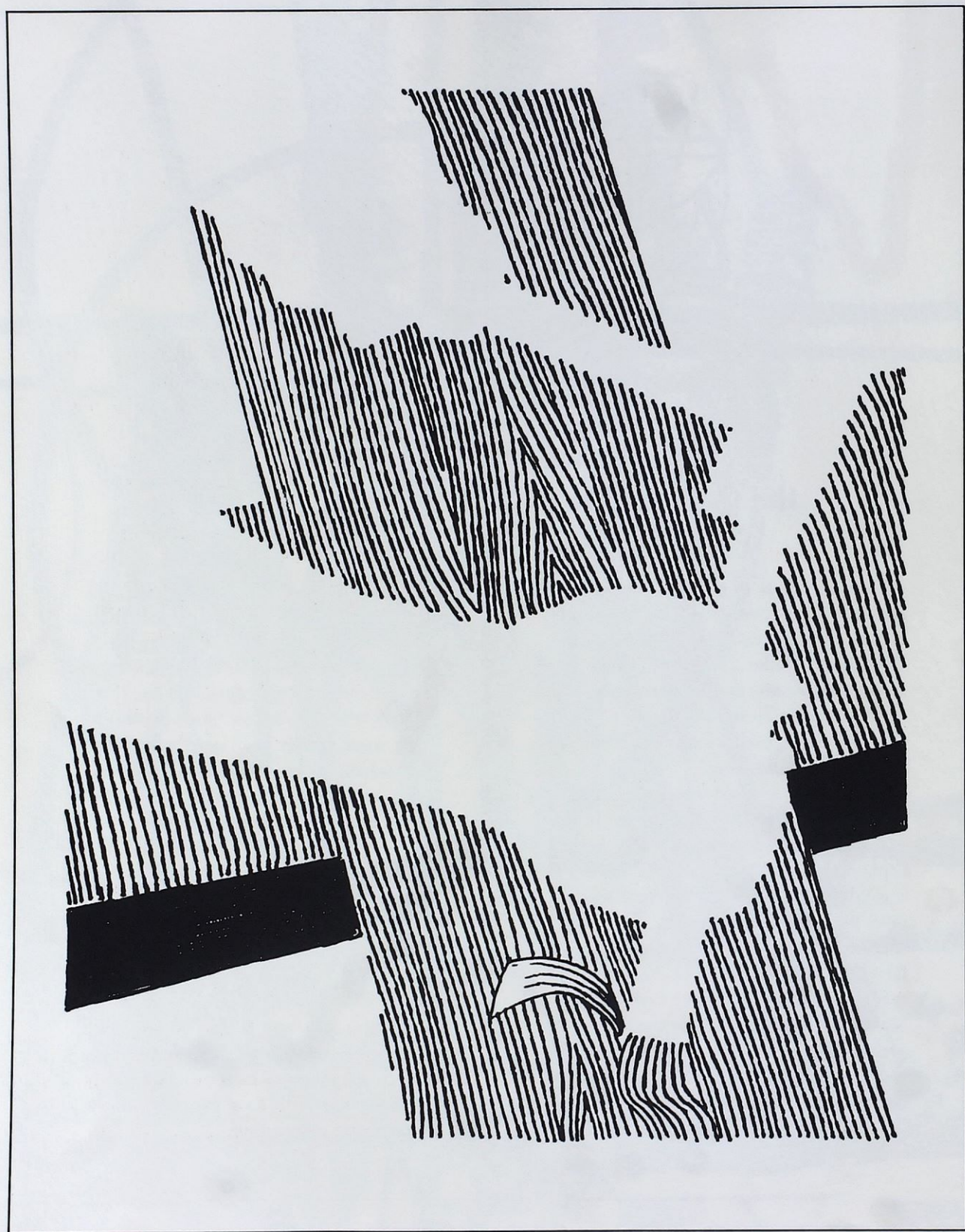
Consider these two words: *layman* and *amateur*. One comes from the religious community and one often is used within the context of the arts. Initially they were reasonable words used to distinguish one type of person from another, but now they are often used in ways that are negative and insulting.

*Layman* is a word originally used to distinguish clergy from nonclergy. It has come to mean someone ignorant of the topic at hand or even someone having no special skills at all. I am not sure when *laity* became identified with the untrained or ignorant. I suspect it might have been around the time great choir screens were erected in the cathedrals separating the clergy from the rest of the community. Then the sound of a bell, the smell of incense, or the sight of smoke rising above the screen became signs to "ordinary" folk that the clergy were there

doing their work. This might have been the time when "ye watchers and ye holy ones" became two separate categories. Regardless, if you wish to be identified as a totally uninformed person in our times, simply label yourself as "just a layman."

A word closely associated with *layman* is *amateur*. Its meaning started out well, "one who loves," but has deteriorated to mean someone without professional skill. *Amateurism* refers to mediocrity. Once we realize that a vast majority of any congregation's members are amateurs and lay persons when it comes to art and theology, we can sense the reasons for bad self-image. It is disheartening to go from congregation to congregation, attempting to involve members in the making of art for their worship centers, only to find extremely talented folk unwilling to extend their skills to the service of the worshipping community.







For three years I have tried to get a highly skilled cabinetmaker to make the altar-table and font for the small country church to which he belongs. I encouraged the congregation to move the old altar and font into the new building in the hope that the cabinetmaker would eventually make the new ones. This was probably a bad idea, since it has now become a struggle between the two of us, and the congregation is getting used to having the old furnishings in the new church. I doubt that a new altar and font will ever be built by this man. Why—because he doesn't think his work is worthy? No, because his fellow members will see his work and constantly pass judgment. At least, that is what he thinks.

Part of the fear this man and other people like him struggle with is the uncertainty that their work will be good enough for its special purpose. But there is an even greater fear that friends and fellow members will not accept or appreciate what they have taken such pains to make. They might even criticize. It's difficult to be a layperson, and it's even more difficult when you are also an amateur. It's much easier to order something from a "professional." They don't have to face the possibility of snide remarks. Who would have the nerve to criticize the work of a "professional"? Even if there are criticisms, the professional doesn't have to stay around and listen to them.

All of this sounds petty, doesn't it? Not at all the way the church's business should sound. Unfortunately it's not uncommon.

The business of the church's people is

the work of liberation. Each of us is bound in special ways to the difficulties of human existence. We are all confronted by selfishness, fear, and an inability to love with our whole hearts. As people who name Jesus as Lord, we also must know ourselves as forgiven. We can thus live happily the life of the coming kingdom—the life lived for others. For those blessed with interest and skill in creative expression, it means being willing to risk not only the fear that comes with sharing their gifts but also the necessity of having to give those gifts away. For those who have the opportunity to encounter and use the new and often strange work of the artist, it means coming to understand that receiving the gift is part of the process of making it. It's the part that allows the work of art to become an affirmation of who we are and where we are. Art takes part in the proclamation of our own liberation as well as the liberation of all of humanity. Any artist involved in this work *must* be an amateur—one who loves. Any expression of art destined to function in worship or witness must celebrate God's gift of salvation to all peoples and our new life as recipients of that gift. That celebration must include an infinite variety of forms, styles, and content—at least as much variety as God's mercy allows.

### THE BUILDING COMMITTEE

There is so much I want to say to members of building committees, but no advice could be more useful than to be of good cheer. That advice is no more simplistic than the counsel to love others.



To follow it will require hard work and an unlimited sense of humor. I have counseled hundreds of building committees, and each is a unique, struggling entity. At some time in the committee's life, each member questions whatever possessed him or her to get involved in such a venture. We may remind each other gently and eloquently of the wonderful business at hand, but some are still willing to go to war over the width of sewer pipe. The following counsel is derived from hours of meeting over the disposition of hundreds of miles of sewer pipe.

1. *Delight in being amateurs.* Be students. Don't spend your time together simply sharing opinions. Become a study group. *Learn* how you can best serve the needs of your congregation. Your work starts with an understanding of worship and witness needs and practices.

2. *Start from the beginning.* Become acquainted with the history of church art and architecture. Understand your work as being a new part of that history.

3. *Don't be exclusive.* Design your committee to be representational of your congregation. Include retired people, single people, teenagers, people with disabilities. Include pastors as committee members. Their experience and training will be valuable. Remember, however, that when it comes to *this* building or remodeling project or *this* decorating work, they usually know little if any more than the other members.

4. *Don't be secretive.* Share your work and concerns regularly with the congregation. Too many are amazed at what their building committees came up

with as they view the results for the first time at the dedication. The congregation must be involved.

4. *Identify your community and your mission.* Your project is an extension of the work and look of the community that surrounds it. Be able to articulate what differences your congregation is making or intends to make in your community and what difference this building or remodeling project will make to your mission.

6. *Build from the inside.* Worship space is work space—for all kinds of work using all kinds of formats and equipment. Flexibility and versatility are not dirty words. They are requirements for those who understand art and worship as creative, living, and essential aspects of the Christian life. Question the meaning of and necessity for everything. The following have nothing to do with meaning or necessity:

"It looks nice."

"The beautiful downtown church has one."

"I saw one in a basilica in Rome."

"She's a well-known religious artist."

7. *Look for a good architect.* A good architect, not necessarily a *church* architect. If you can get both, wonderful! A great deal of church architecture is of mediocre design. Because an architect has done a church building does not necessarily mean he or she is qualified to assist you. Look first for an architect who is sympathetic to honest use of materials, sensitive and creative with design, and a good listener.

8. *Don't let the architect dominate the process.* You are the client. The architect



works for you. Assuming that you have done your homework (if it took you less than six months, you are not done yet), that architect should not know any more about your needs than you do. Too many church building programs become opportunities for the architect to show off. This happens when the congregation is made to feel subservient to the architect, and it can only happen when the congregation does not assume its share of the preparation and responsibility for the project. When done correctly, the building effort is a collaborative adventure. A good architect will assure this.

9. *Unify the parts of the project during the conception.* If this is not done, the interior will visually be a collection of parts rather than a single entity.

10. *Deal honestly with your creative resources.* Allow architect and artist to compete against themselves, not against one another. An unsuccessful solution is not a reason to change architects any more than an unsuccessful sermon is cause for changing pastors. These are opportunities for discussion and growth. Having more than one artist designing the same project at the same time is not only unethical but very impractical. It makes any final judgment an aesthetic one rather than one based on need or appropriateness. This will simply pit one person's opinions against another's without allowing the idea to develop and build on a succession of concepts.

11. *Try hard to avoid the "memorial" aspect of giving.* I know it is a common practice to acquire the things you need for your building by putting a price on them

and having people purchase those items. The process is inevitably accompanied by having a bronze plaque attached to the item or a name inscribed in a book of memorials. When the time comes for objects to be replaced — and the time always comes — feelings are hurt and necessary changes are left undone because pride was attached to a thing. It is often easier to change pastors than candelabra.

People's unwillingness to allow items they gave to the church to be moved or given away really means they didn't give them at all. They attached heavy strings between their pride and the things they bought, and as long as the strings are still attached they act as if they are the owners. If people are really willing to give to the building program, let them give to the fund out of which all the necessary purchases will be made. Let the congregation make the purchases, not the individual members.

Another great mistake allowed for in the memorializing system is one in which the donor and artist collaborate to produce a work that both might deem appropriate but that hasn't been worked into a unified design concept. Don't let this happen. Art can be the call to servant. Giving can be the response.

12. *View dedication as commencement.* The dedication of a building or remodeling project is much like giving birth. It is followed shortly by postpartum blues. I very much like the idea of dedicating a worship space before it is finished. This allows the building and the congregation to grow together and downplays the completion of construction as an end in itself. Perhaps







the building committee, upon dedication of the project, could combine with the worship committee, offering its experience and new sense of place to those charged with designing the use of that place.

### THE WORSHIP COMMITTEE

Each congregation seems to devise its own ways of channeling energy into action. Many of these systems seem to use up energy just being systems. This can happen when the workload is chopped up into small sections and assigned to various committees that have no channels of communication between them. Often committees assume responsibilities that are not theirs or expect other committees to do work that actually is theirs to do. In the mess of systems, quite often two (or more) groups are assigned identical jobs. The pastor can easily get caught up in the middle of all of this. One pastor asked me to execute a series of banners for special services. The budget was worked out, the banners were completed and delivered. I then discovered that the pastor was working on his own. Furthermore, while the altar guild liked the work, the worship committee did not. The art became a cause for much hurt and embarrassment and was never used.

I don't intend to organize church structure on these pages. I would, however, like to encourage worship committees. I know of no church group charged with more important or far-reaching work. Worship is the heart of our life together. As such, it needs constant activity and nourishment. It is the great task of worship committees to see that all members contribute to that

nourishment. Of course, these contributions can take many forms.

A division of the work of the worship committee is that work traditionally carried out by the altar guild. This involves the care and maintenance of vestments, paraments, communion vessels, the work of the acolytes, and all appointments relating to altar, font, and pulpit. This group might also participate in executing paraments and banners under the direction of the worship committee. The primary reason for resting authority in the larger committee is so that connections may be made between the various visual elements and the music, lessons, and sermon. Worship committees spend very little energy doing what I believe is one of their most important tasks: unifying the worship experience. Have you ever wondered why so many banners have words and phrases on them? It is because the bannermaker isn't making the connections between the visual possibilities of the banner and the verbal emphasis that can be given to the visual with well-chosen hymns or readings.

Worship elements must work together so that each part does not have to do everything. Each element, serving the others, thus serves the focus of the whole. But collaboration among the creators of image and sound takes work. I make a special plea to ministers of music and/or choir directors to exert greater effort at collaboration. A 15-minute weekly conference with the pastor doesn't use the worship committee to its fullest potential. Better for this group and all who wish to assist in this wonderful work to meet



together for a week in the summer or two long weekends in the fall to map out the concerns, festivities, and projects for the coming year. General monthly meetings to follow up and deal with ongoing concerns might then be adequate.

### THE CHILDREN

I suspect that the single most neglected resource for fine art in the church is its children. Artistically children are all born geniuses. We manage to de-genius them by about the time they reach the fourth or fifth grade. Poor art education practices in elementary schools force children to compete with one another or even with the teacher. Sunday schools all too often provide absurd art projects and coloring pages.

Learn from children. Let their art become a part of community praise. In one Oregon church, a small band of cork board runs around the entire church room and holds a continually changing display of children's art. In a Louisiana congregation, children take turns doing each Sunday's bulletin cover using a variety of materials. The young artist, on his or her particular Sunday, acts as an usher, handing out his or her art to the people as they enter. Beautiful! One of the loveliest full frontals I have ever seen was done by the children of the Maple Leaf Lutheran Church of Seattle. It was made of paper, colored with crayons, and it was as fine as any embroidered Carolingian parament.

### THE HOME

How many of the things we do in worship are also things we do at home?







How much of the work of worship ought to be continued as the work of the home? Luther wrote his Small Catechism to help parents instruct their children in the home. These days instruction is the job of pastors and professional educators. Our time is spent going in so many directions that it is very difficult to connect any two destinations. And the distractions are so marvelous that, even if we should reverently tiptoe home after worship, the funny papers, the Dallas Cowboys, and the fried chicken that meet us on our arrival will insure that the previous hour's celebration will not interfere with what is left of Sunday. What we do in worship somehow has to break through the clutter and make connections with the rest of our lives. Somehow what we do at work and at home and at school and at play also has to break through the clutter and make connections to the experience of worship. It has to *be* worship. There are a number of visible ways to assist in this connecting. Some we have discussed: bread and wine from the family oven and pantry, the use of signs and images from the

neighborhood, the visible naming of people we actually know. These are elements we take from the home into worship. Other elements we can take from worship into the home. The baptismal candle can assist in connecting the birthday with the re-birthday. The congregation can encourage the family altar by providing small silkscreened banners to enhance a sense of community even away from the worship arena. A simple parament for the dining room table that changes color with the seasons of the church year will help to make connections between the family meal and the Lord's Supper.

The most effective visible connection between worship and the other arenas of our complex life may not be considered a work of art at all. That connection is "simply" being Christs in our communities. This means understanding our neighborhood as extraordinary and in need of ministry—our ministry. It means visibly illustrating the meaning of Christ by sharing in the suffering and victory of the cross of Christ. It means being God's work of art.









## Chapter Six

### Being on the Way

I have heard many variations of this parable, from poetic to crude. Here's one version:

An Arab was walking across the desert in the cool of the evening. He spied a small bird shivering and almost dead on the trail's edge. The Arab stopped and gently picked up the fragile bird and put it inside his robe to keep it warm. It was difficult to walk and still keep the bird safely nestled so, when he came upon a fresh pile of camel dung, warm and steaming, he fashioned a small nest and placed the still-shivering bird in it. Immediately the little bird felt the warmth of the manure and, once it was thoroughly warmed, began to chirp and sing merrily. A hawk flying over the desert heard the chirping bird, spotted it, flew down, grabbed it in its talons, shook it, and devoured it so that all that remained was a tiny feather.

The Arabs point out three lessons to be learned from this story. One, not everyone that puts you into a mess is your enemy; two, not everyone who gets you out of a mess is your friend; and three, when you are in a mess, don't sing.

These times are certainly messy. Not only is the world full of pain and anguish, but the behavior of Christ's body, the church, often seems to add to the ugliness. Much of the work of the church seems to ignore the hurt and the hurting, the unlovable, the powerless, the disenfranchised, the enemy. It might very well be that the process of ignoring people is the same process by which we make enemies of them. Worship itself may become the ritual we use to



disassociate ourselves from things we do not like.

It is time we understand worship as a friend that puts us into the midst of the world's mess. If this is too silly a possibility for us to picture, if we cannot be convinced as we sit in our air-conditioned sanctuaries on crushed velvet cushioned pews staring at our images of Jesus meek and mild that our focus must be on the people God gives us to love, then we must leave our places of worship and concentrate for a long while on this:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:5-8).

If our worship and all its symbols ever cause us to lose sight of how that servanthood worked and how that form of a servant must continue to be ours, then that worship is something other than Christian.

I suspect that you have a rather somber picture of what such a servant might look like. To enliven your concept, I recommend a look at the face of Mother Teresa. Joy radiates from it. Exuberance and strength shine from her. This cannot be because of what she has seen, but rather because of what she knows. She knows that she is known of God. The squalor and deprivation to which

she has been sent are gifts from God, opportunities for ministry. And she is a Christ where she goes. Like Mother Teresa, we must forget the third lesson of the Arab parable and, in spite of the circling hawk, sing from within the mess. "Bless this mess," we pray, and God's answer to the prayer is us.

That takes a powerful lot of knowing. It is a knowing so strong that seeing is affected. You are aware of how this works. As you look into a baby carriage and quip about a face only a mother could love, your reaction acknowledges the possibility of love affecting vision. Or you see a girl who is tall and beautiful walking hand in hand with a short, froggy-looking fellow. As they stare starry-eyed at each other, you ask, "What does she see in him?" Once again we understand that the knowing that comes with a relationship is cause for a special kind of seeing. It is the special kind of seeing that the psalmist attributes to God when he writes, "Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death, and keep them alive in famine" (Ps. 33: 18-19). That God sees us in such a special way is a source of hope and joy. And that hope and joy is what causes us to see the world in a special way.

Paul Cezanne said it was not possible to paint an apple until you knew the apple. Are you tempted to smirk at that? Some things are worth knowing and some things are not, right? Wrong! If we know—not just say but know—that God loved the world so much that he gave his Son for it, then we know that the



whole world can and must worship its Creator. That creation includes wheat and grapes and water, you and me, and apples. There is a great deal more worth knowing than we have confronted in worship. And what is worth knowing is worth confronting visually.

Our first introduction to the world was through our eyes, not through words. Explanations for what we were seeing came much later. We have been striving from that time until now to adjust the relationships between seeing and knowing because they are often in conflict. Remember standing on the railway tracks and following the path of the tracks to the horizon? It appeared that they converged although we knew the tracks remained constantly parallel. Based on how we behave, is it really possible to convince the world that God would sacrifice his only Son on our behalf? Incorporated into our work must be the task of looking like what we know we are, what we are called to be—Christ.

Artists and their unique ways of seeing and knowing model this life for us. By adding form to ideas, they create a visual context for us. By adding their special knowing to the commonplace, they hold up the life around us as redeemable. Furthermore, artists understand their work as process rather than product. Congregations can learn a great deal about celebration by adopting a similar outlook.

The successful congregation can point with pride to its beautiful facility, its banner collection, its marble altar with matching font, its beautiful glass, its pipe organ, its list of baptized and confirmed

that is larger than its list of transferred and buried, its mortgage burning, its well-attended programs and worship services. Such a congregation is obviously successful. We might even conclude that this success is a sign that God has favored its work. That might be true. The next step, however, would be to assume that the congregation that dissolved, that split into a number of smaller gatherings, that can only afford to worship in homes, that is part of a dual-congregation program because it cannot afford the salary of a pastor of its own is unsuccessful and might not have caught God's attention. Blessing and success seem too often measured by achievement.

It is really quite rare that the great artist points with pride to a work just finished. The real joy was the making. The doing was worth the doing. Many artists have conceded at the end of their lives that they could have done better. Luther's last written words, "We are all beggars," was a final affirmation of our need for grace.

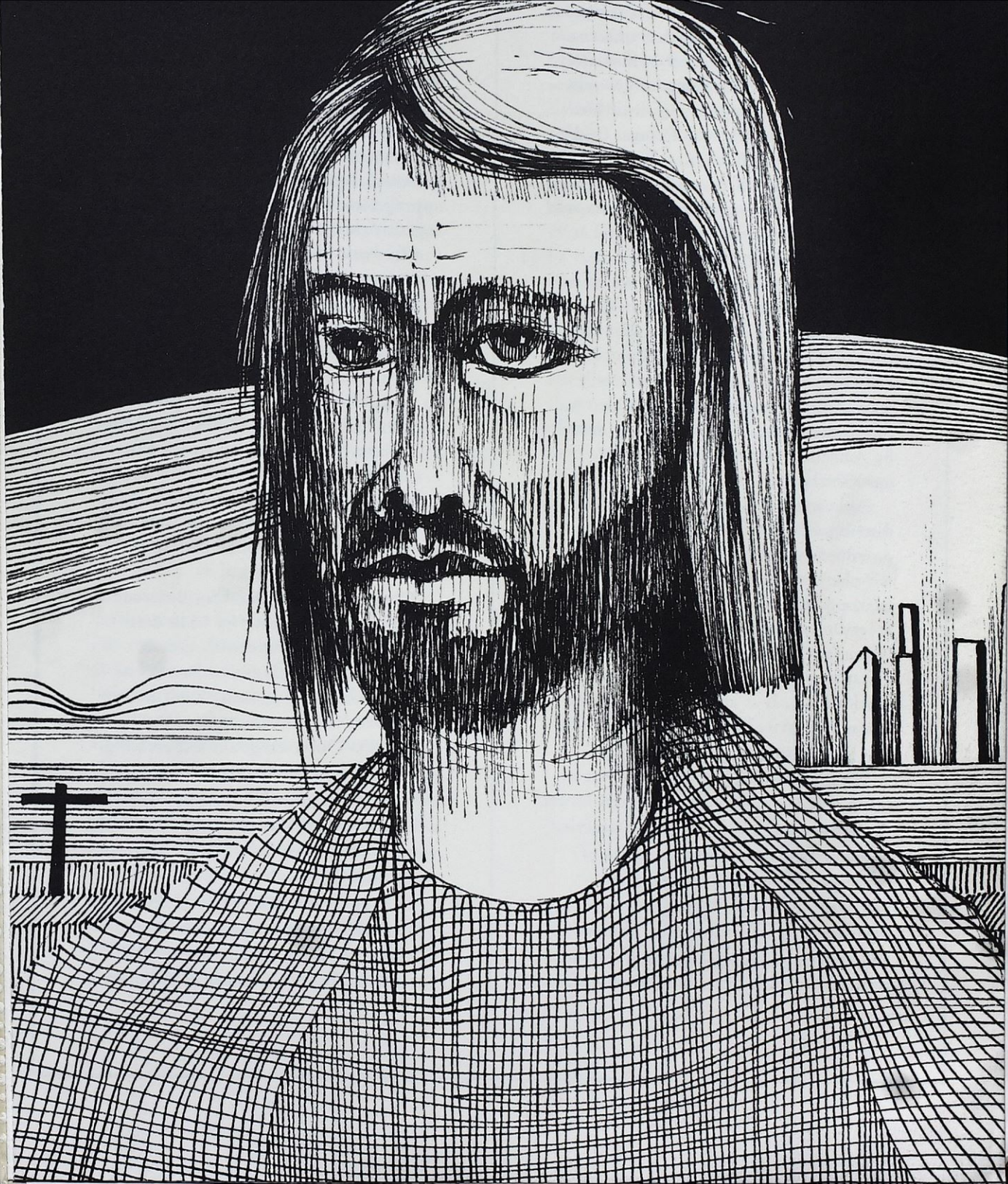
The creative life accepts the opportunity to do what has not yet been done. The risk of failure is not only present but integrated within the creative process. The work of art is a reason for the artist to continue, since the process of doing it includes the process of new learning. In many respects, the work of art is an indictment of the artist's inability to successfully transfer all he or she knows and feels to a specific form or object. It therefore demands another try.

I often wonder whether God received greater enjoyment out of creating the











universe or in having it after it was completed. From strictly an artist's point of view, I can imagine another universe somewhere created by God immediately after the Fall. The Creator surely would have wanted to keep trying until he got it right. Foolish wonderings. God took a Sabbath rest, that is all. Creation continued and still continues. The proof is in the creative use of manger, cross, and tomb. If we know anything of God at all, it is as Creator. If we were created in God's image, and we were, we must have been created to be creative. If we have lost part of that image, and we have, then perhaps it is the risky delight in creativity we have lost. If there is any way of making God's work visible on earth—and that is our calling—it must be by reflecting the creative nature of our Creator.

Creativity does not collect, it distributes. Creativity is not exclusive. Anyone posing as a professional creator is a charlatan. Creativity is a variety of hope. It is too busy discovering to worry about whether or not it is important. That's why it is important. Creativity is more important than a work of art. It is art. Creativity is an absence of fear. It is therefore a sign of love—at least it ought to be.

What a curiosity to see folks upset by other people's creativity. We often forget that a very important form of creativity is the delight we take in the gifts of other people. Artists often forget and tend to unload their efforts on unsuspecting folk expecting admiration and appreciation to come full-blown in return. We must learn to take delight.

Surprises should not automatically offend us. Nor should the surprise of silence offend the artist. Delight sometimes takes time. Sometimes it never comes, and that also is fine. Picasso's *Guernica* might make an excellent backdrop for a worship service. Delight, however, would not be a reasonable attitude to take in its presence. Indignation might be more appropriate. Then perhaps we should call together the best poets and musicians we can find and commission them to create a liturgy of indignation.

It would be interesting to imagine a congregation that accepted all forms and versions of creativity in its worship and witness. Would it be wonderful or chaotic to accept anything and everything? Probably a bit of both. It is not necessary to see how many forms of art we can cram into a given order of service. Extravagance is no substitute for energy. Much better that we have available a bank of possibilities from which to draw when occasion demands.

There is great potential for different forms of art and creativity to be used more continuously and with greater variety as the congregation moves out of its worship setting into its witnessing arena. And this arena is changing drastically. Our average age is increasing, our work week is decreasing. For an ever-increasing number, unemployment and early retirement have eliminated the work week altogether. Leisure time weighs heavily.

The family, like all of the structures on which we have depended, has altered drastically. Single parent homes are commonplace. The number of children



born outside of marriage is increasing alarmingly. Our parents are cared for by strangers in their old age in places crammed with old people doing little else but waiting. Birthing, teaching, and dying have been taken from our homes and located in environments of sterility.

The ills and sorrows of the world are graphically displayed while we eat our TV dinners from disposable metal containers. The horrors of war are juxtaposed with attempts to make all of our armpits smell alike.

The direction education is taking offers little hope for the creative revitalization of our congregations. In most classrooms, attendance is tantamount to participation. That mistaken notion extends to worship. In addition, opportunities to become sensitized to ideas, poetry, drama, and visual expression are not taken advantage of as students opt for vocational training. It may very well be that the teaching and learning of skills that affirm the life of hope as a working and creating life, not only a waiting time, needs to be the work of the church. For example, some congregations are channeling their creative energies into hospitals or retirement homes. I recall fondly the artist-in-residency at St. Luke's Lutheran Hospital in Saginaw, Michigan. The opportunities I saw there for growing in faith and visually sharing the life of hope with patients and staff make the time and project worth recommending to hospitals in general.

People don't become something else when they enter the worship room. Whatever confronts us in our daily lives we take with us to the altar. May we

be excused if the bombardment of desensitizing conditions and events we have experienced does not support a concern for creativity, beauty, or sensitivity in worship and witness? The situations that surround us comprise our mission field. For some this field is worldwide, for others it is only as large as a room. Whatever the extent or dimensions of our witness, if it were ever a cut-and-dried calling, it cannot be now. If it were ever possible to praise God while being bored, it is not possible now. If there were ever a moment in history when the church could communicate its reason for being in less than the most dynamic way possible, that time is not now. If ever the church needed the best tools for celebration, the most creative energies with which to carry out its mission, it needs them now. There has never been a greater need for the crucified Christ to be held high before a hurting world. We can do this with our creativity, our identification with all suffering humanity, our questing for peace, and our joyful expectation of the coming age of Shalom.





## Further Encouragement for Your Journey

### IF YOU ARE AN ARTIST

*Both thought and thew now bolder  
And told by Nature: Tower;  
Head, heart, hand, heel, and shoulder  
That beat and breathe in power—  
This pride of prime's enjoyment  
Take as for tool, not toy meant  
And hold at Christ's employment.*

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

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### IF YOU ARE ON A BUILDING COMMITTEE

*It is a serious error to take conventionalism  
for a kind of humility. God will not  
stand for any kind of lukewarmness. He  
demands silence or boldness.*

JEAN COCTEAU

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## IF YOU ARE ON A WORSHIP COMMITTEE

*A work of art that is not good and true in art is not good or true in any other respect and is useless for any purpose whatsoever—even for edification.*

DOROTHY SAYERS

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#### IF YOU ARE AN ONLOOKER WHO NEEDS ENCOURAGEMENT

*We have to realize that a creative being lives within ourselves, whether we like it or not, and that we must get out of its way, for it will give us no peace until we do.*

MARY RICHARDS

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## Notes